7
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

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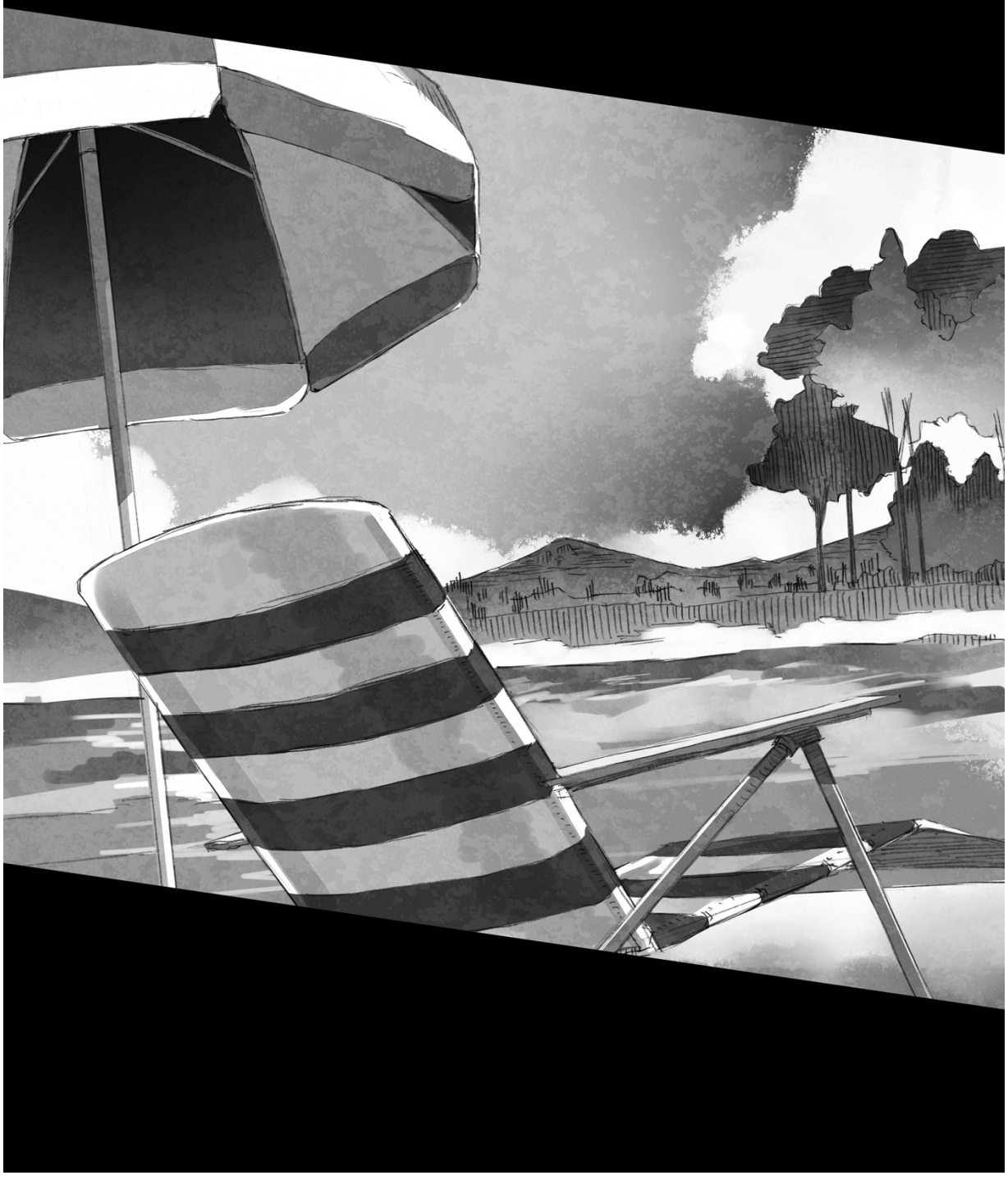
Chapter One
What If She Wore a Swimsuit?



From the very start, my excitement levels were at C-L-I-M-A-X.

"Look at all this sunlight!"

A blue sky without a cloud in sight!

The sun pounding brilliantly down!

Even the sun's skin-scorching rays practically feel good at this moment!

Oh, it's great to be alive!

And why!

"Look at the white sand stretching off as far as the eye can see!"

The sand felt lovely, crunching under my bare feet.

"Look at the spray from the water!"

Droplets came raining down, turning rainbow colored where they reflected the sun.

"Listen to those sweet, dulcet tones!"

Girls' playful voices overlapped one another, a pleasure to my ears.

I spread both arms wide, as if to take in the sun overhead and the whole world before me.

"Yes! Here we are at the beach in summer! .....Uh, I mean, not technically."

But the feeling was close enough.

Yes: the place where we were was like the sea, but it wasn't the sea.

It was a lake.

We had come to this lake, a short ride from Amutech's mansion by bird-drawn carriage, for some R&R. It was a piece of land near the capital of Marinos that was owned directly by the Holy Eldant Empire itself, and rulers had long used it to chase away the heat. It was, in essence, a summer palace.

There was a pretty good-sized lake here—not huge, but big enough to have a beach and even waves, and you could swim in it.

That's right. Swim.

And swimming meant...

"Oh, how wonderful to be alive!" I gave thanks to all the gods and Buddhas that I had been born into this world.

It was time for me to experience the full power of three dimensions! I tried to act cool about it, but it didn't last very long.

After all...

"What are you up to?"

The question came from my approaching bodyguard, the WAC Koganuma Minori-san.

Normally she dressed in a shirt and tight skirt, very much an *I'm-a-public-servant* thing. But not now. Oh, not now. For starters, the surface area of visible skin was an order of magnitude different.

"We came all this way. How about a swim?" she asked.

Because now, she was wearing a swimsuit.

And it was, of all things... a black bikini!!

Her chest, it was like, *bounce, bounce*, and her butt, it was like, squeezing from side to side as she moved—and her toned hips, they were like, calling out to me... Ahhh.

Her whole body was a weapon!

All she had to do was walk, and she had me within an inch of my life.

Especially the cleft of that chest! The valley that ran between her two pale hills! I just wanted to shove my face into it until I suffocated. *Please! I would prostrate myself, do anything, just let me bury myself in there!*

I fought the urge to let my thoughts out of my mouth at a high volume, saying instead, "Heh heh heh. Yes, the opportunity isn't lost on me..."

"Not that I care, but you've got a nosebleed." Minori-san narrowed her eyes at me behind her glasses.

"Ergh. I'd like to bring charges against you for walking around with a weapon..."

"*What* are you talking about? Come on, Myusel's waiting, too."

She pointed in the direction of the water. And there...

"Ohhhhhh..."

I let out a breath without meaning to.

Myusel Fourant.

My adorable maid.

And now she was like a fairy, no, a *goddess* of the water.

For work, Myusel normally wore an outfit that left comparatively little to the imagination, but the chest and thigh areas were relaxed, to make it easy to move, and so I rarely get a sense of her true, uh, proportions.

Now, however, it was all there for me to see.

The white halter-neck bikini Minori-san had gotten for her was practically blinding! I had heard in the past that my maid was surprisingly chesty, but now I understood! Not too big, not too small, but undeniably announcing its presence—a perfectly balanced and beautiful bust! And

complementing that by covering her lower body with a sarong was the perfect decision.

Yes, shyness! A bashful expression was the perfect look for Myusel!

“Minori-san,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“I think I might have been born to witness this very day.”

“...You know, I think you might be right.” There was a hint of exasperation in her voice, but I ignored it.

“Master...” Myusel noticed me looking at her and immediately looked at the ground. The way she looked when she was shy like that was absolutely adorable. “It, uh, it doesn’t look strange?”

“What doesn’t?”

“I mean... Uh, my...”

“Perish the thought!” I said, clenching my fist emphatically. “I think it’s absolutely wonderful!”

“I—I see... Th-That’s good, then,” she said, stuttering and blushing. “I’ve never... gone out looking like this before, so... But if it makes you happy, Master, then...”

Come to think of it, when did swimsuits assume their current form?

I saw in a book somewhere that in the old days, they simply consisted of cloth that could safely get wet, and they covered the entire body, sort of like a modern wetsuit. Considering Eldant culture and values, the way the girls were dressed now could well be viewed as equivalent to going out in your underwear. It was no surprise that Myusel felt a little shy.

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But that was excellent, too! Points for bashfulness!

Even as I was mulling over these happy thoughts...

“Oof!”

Out of the corner of my vision, I saw something throw sand in the air like a snowplow kicking up fresh snow.

I looked over to see a girl with animal ears and a tail, partly concealed by the flying sand, digging madly into the shore.

Elvia Harneiman.

A werewolf girl.

“I guess she really is a puppy,” I said with a fond smile.

Elvia, of course, was also wearing a swimsuit. With her, however, that meant she didn’t look all that different from usual. A tube top was standard with her, and when she was in her own room she tended to hang around in what amounted to underwear, so it wasn’t like this was the first time I’d seen her this way. But still...

“Mm... Scandalous.”

Motion was definitely the key to making the most out of Elvia’s attractiveness. The heart-leapingness that poured from her entire body! Skin and more skin! It seemed to increase her eroticism by at least fifty percent over just standing still. Yes, as if every bead of sweat on her forehead were a diamond!

And at the moment, she was digging furiously in the sand.

Which is to say, from my perspective, her behind was clearly visible, and because of the need to give her tail somewhere to go, the bottom of her swimsuit was pretty risqué. And then there was the way she moved left and right and left and right as she dug, as if hitting my libido with a *take this! And this! And one of these!*

And then...

“Shinichi!”

I turned at the sound of my name to find the owner of this lake. That is, the ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire, Empress Petralka an Eldant III.

Despite her imposing name, she looked like a young girl, practically a kid.

She was in a swimsuit, too, but of course her chest was less robust than the others’.

But let me be clear: that’s great!

“What is it you’re doing?”

On top of that, her suit was an old-style school one. It even had a tag on the front, diligently labeled “Pe-tral-ka” in hiragana. This was *the* essential point when it came to olden-style school swimsuits like this one. I had no idea whose stroke of genius it had been—Petralka had enough manga and anime knowledge that she might even have come up with it herself—but it was perfect, the absolute ultimate!

...etc., etc.

I was busy drinking in her beautiful form when—

“Come on, get in the water,” Minori-san said, giving me a push from behind. “You already spend all your time indoors anyway.”

“Uh, no, thanks, I’m full—er, I mean...” I looked back at her over my shoulder as she continued to push me closer to Myusel and Petralka. “I thought this was supposed to be *your* vacation, Minori-san.”

“Yeah, I guess,” smiled the baby-faced, big-boobed WAC. “But routine is routine. Just because someone tells you, ‘Hey, go out and play’...”

“Is that it?”

When it came to a comparison between outdoors and indoors, I think it was fair to say that a member of the Ground Self-Defense Force did most of her work outside, except maybe for paperwork. I bet a lot of people in the JSDF actually preferred to spend their time off lounging at home.

“I’m actually not the only one taking off today. I wonder what the others are up to,” Minori-san said, cocking her head.

“I guess there aren’t that many places to go for fun in the Eldant Empire, huh?” I joined her in her puzzlement.

As I mentioned, this “Ooh! Girls Galore Swimsuit Contest! Can You Believe (etc.)” event was originally about helping Minori-san burn some vacation time. Both she and the other JSDF soldiers here were on a strictly confidential assignment, which was another way of saying that they were essentially on the clock every moment that they were here. In order to preserve secrecy, they also didn’t get many chances to go back to Japan.

In short, their vacation days just piled up.

Apparently, a command had come down from above for the soldiers stationed in Eldant to use up some of their accrued leave. If they couldn’t at least report on paper that their troops had had a break, there would be administrative headaches later.

As we’ve discussed, however, there was a lot of red tape involved in going back to Japan. That left the JSDF people to find something to do with

their free time here in Eldant, so there was a distinct risk of defeating the point.

One of the proposed solutions to this search for diversion was a day in the water. The Eldant summer was just starting, we were getting into the sweaty season, and in addition, Petralka had recently asked me, "What does the expression 'swimsuit episode' in this anime mean?" It all added up to one thing: everyone getting together for a day at the beach.

"All I'm saying is, don't hide in some corner, just come play," Minori-san said.

As we talked over my shoulder, I naturally started walking more slowly. And where Minori-san had initially been shoving me with her arms out, she had begun to lean into the project, using her whole body against my back, her whole— my back— her chest was— her boobs were...!

"Everyone wants to play with you, Shinichi-kun."

"Y-Y-Y-Yeah, you're right!" Hearing the word *play* while feeling that soft, round, soft roundness against my back sent my mind directly to the gutter. I retrieved it with an immense effort and heaved a sigh. I would have liked another moment to record this scene of paradise on the hard drive of my brain.

Incidentally, the female royal knights who had accompanied Petralka were also in swimsuits, allegedly "for protection." They wore bikini-style suits and a minimum of armor—pauldrons and boots, along with a sword, a combination that looked a bit like the "bikini armor" of the good old days, and it was great.

I gathered that Minori-san had arranged the suits for them. The designs were kind of plain, but the bodies these women had achieved through rigorous daily training more than made up for it.

"How wonderful, this peach village! Incredible! La**ta really does exist!" I howled to the shining sun.

"Rather than talk, why don't you swim, Kanou Shinichi?" a voice said.

I stiffened a little and looked to the owner of the voice.

A young man stood there regally. He had the same silver hair and emerald eyes as Petralka, but it was the fineness of his features above all that gave him away as a member of the royal bloodline. He looked practically perfect; if I were a woman, I think I would fall in love with him at first sight.

Minister Garius en Cordobal.

He was the head of the knight forces, the person with practical control over the imperial military. He was beautiful and noble and powerful; he had the brains and he had the brawn—they say heaven doesn't give two gifts, but he had three or four, and as a fellow man, I had a thing or two to say about how unfair God could be.

There was just one thing about Garius that I wasn't envious of at all: his interest in men.

This knight was, as we say, *homo-homoshii*: gay. Not, like, *happy*-gay, I mean *gay*-gay. Super gay.

Now, normally he was very self-restrained, so there wasn't really any trouble, but at the moment I was in a swimsuit too—and I was a little unsettled by the sense that Garius couldn't take his eyes off me.

"I know we're at the beach, but what do you think you're wearing?" I said.

"Hm?" he replied, and even his gesture of puzzlement seemed like it could conjure rose blossoms out of thin air. "Koganuma Minori prepared it for me as the most fitting swimsuit for myself. Do you have some sort of objection?"

Garius's swimsuit was a male bikini.

But that wasn't really the part I had a problem with.

No, my real concern was the black bowtie he was wearing around his bare neck. How perverted did you have to be to think that up?!

Worse, Garius seemed to believe that this was proper swim attire as dictated by Japanese culture, so rather than being embarrassed, he wore the whole thing proudly.

"Minori-san..."

"Yes?" The root of all evil (or at least all rottenness) around here acted perfectly calm despite the *what-have-you-done* look emanating from my squinting eyes.

"What is that?"

"What's what? It's the Bare Butler."

"You have some awfully weird terms at your disposal."

"You think so?"

Minori-san looked at Garius, who was smiling unabashedly. I thought I would get dizzy just looking at him. And to top it all off...

"Now, Shinichi." Garius came over and put a hand on my shoulder. I almost choked at the touch of bare skin on bare skin, a sensation I had

previously been spared by the presence of clothing.

The gesture was casual, yet I felt his fingers lightly trace the line of my collarbone.

I was just suppressing a scream when I noticed a female knight coming in our direction, playing with a 3TS. It was one of the prizes we had given the top teams at the imperial soccer exhibition a while ago—specifically, we had given them to the lizardman team, but most of them had no interest in video games, and so had sold them to nobles and prominent merchants who wanted them. So it wasn't that surprising if Garius or one of his knights should have a system.

At the moment, the camera on the back of the 3TS was aimed directly at me...

"Were you able to get it?" Garius asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm used to controlling this thing by now, so it was simple."

She had taken my picture.

"Hey, just what do you think you're photographing?"

"Why, *you*, Shinichi, of course." Garius sounded perfectly satisfied and not the least bit guilty about this.

"You can't just—"

"It's only a personal photograph. There's no problem."

"There sure is! The rights to the use of my likeness—"

That was as far as I got before I stopped. This was a place that didn't have so much as the concept of equality—what was the likelihood that "image-use rights" would mean anything to them? Cameras weren't a thing here, which meant sneaking photos wasn't, either. So they certainly wouldn't share my feeling that randomly snapping someone's picture was some kind of issue.

"I just wanted to use this Japanese contraption to capture every detail of your body," Garius said. I thought maybe he blushed ever so slightly—but that had to be my imagination, right? Right. My imagination. It had to be. Imagination!

Garius gestured to a nearby tree and said, "If you don't wish to swim, perhaps you'd like to relax in the shade of that tree?" I felt my hair stand on end at the distinct sense that he was inviting me to, uh, *join* him.

"Oh, no, uh, I'll swim. I think swimming sounds like a great idea!"

Clowning around with Myusel and the others sounded about a hundred-thousand times better than standing here having a vaguely sexually charged

conversation with Garius.

"Okay, cool! Swim time!"

"Hmm," Garius said, sounding somehow disappointed, but I left him standing there and ran as fast as I could over to the girls at the water's edge.

Let's turn back the clock to about a week before our beach adventure.

I was taking care of some random work in my room at our mansion. I was the general manager of the entertainment company Amutech, for what it was worth. I didn't know what the job looked like from other people's perspective, but there was actually a lot to do. Other people handled the really fiddly red tape for me, but there was still no shortage of paperwork that I had to make decisions about.

On top of that, I was teaching classes at our school, so I had to prepare for lessons. All of this still probably made me look pretty relaxed compared to a member of the Japanese workforce or some kid studying for college entrance exams, but for someone whose past experience was primarily as a home security guard, I was awfully busy.

"Hmmm..."

And so, on days when I didn't have to be at school, I was usually surrounded by paperwork. I looked at each item in turn and decided whether or not to go forward with it. Plus, I still had to create a list of stuff we needed to bring over here.

"Shinichi-sama," Myusel said with concern as she set a cup of tea on my desk. "If you let yourself get too busy... I'm afraid you'll harm your health..."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. I grunted "Thanks for the tea" and took a sip. The faint, sweet flavor of fruit balmed my tired brain and eyes. Oh yeah—weren't berries supposed to contain nutrients that were good for your eyes? I didn't suppose Myusel actually knew that, but it was always possible she'd heard it from Minori-san or something.

Speaking of whom, she was set up at a desk and chair in the corner of the room, checking the papers I had finished with. She was technically my bodyguard, so in principle this was totally outside her job description, but as I got busier, she had been kind enough to help me like this.

“She is right, Shinichi.” This came from Petralka, who was reclining on the sofa. “We cannot help but notice that despite the imperial presence, you are not playing host to us very well. What is this business that is so important?”

She picked up one of the papers I had been working on until a few minutes ago and looked it over. It was what we called a “materials order”—in a word, a list of the otaku goods I thought we should import to Eldant next.

Petralka looked over the list, offering comments like “We don’t have that yet” or “What’s that?” as she read. She had gotten pretty good at reading and writing Japanese, so she could probably grasp a fair amount of what was on the list. Sometimes that made her more of a hindrance than a help, but she was still the empress, and officially my employer, so I certainly couldn’t ignore her.

“Thanks, Myusel,” I said. “And I’m sorry, Petralka. I’ll be able to make some time if I can just finish what I’m doing right now. Myusel, I’d really appreciate if you could make some kind of light snack that I could eat while I’m working.”

“Oh—I’m sorry I didn’t notice! I’ll bring something right away!” Myusel bowed deeply and rushed off to the kitchen.

I mean... I wasn’t trying to criticize her...

As a matter of fact, I had been slammed with work that day, and Minori-san and I still hadn’t had lunch. I normally liked for everyone in the mansion to eat together, but it simply hadn’t been possible. I picked up another piece of paper, all too aware of my growling stomach...

There was a knock at the open door. “Hullo.” I looked up and saw a middle-aged man standing there. “Shinichi-kun, Koganuma-kun. May I have a moment?”

The man who came into the room as Myusel was leaving it was Matoba Jinzaburou-san, Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. Although it wasn’t immediately obvious from the organizational chart, he was basically my superior.

More specifically, you could say he was the thread that connected me to the organization above me—namely, the Japanese government. Because of that position, Matoba-san made frequent trips between Japan and Eldant, and we often went days without seeing him at the mansion. Then he would wander in, tell us about some business or other, and then disappear again.

Today, uncharacteristically, he had a companion with him, a uniformed JSDF soldier. Maybe his bodyguard? But it would be unusual for his bodyguard to come inside with him.

"Matoba-san," I asked, "were you back in Japan again?" I realized it had been nearly a month since we had seen him last.

"Such is work," he said with a shrug. Then he turned to Minori-san. "Speaking of which—Koganuma-kun. I'm not here for Shinichi-kun today, but for you."

"Me, sir? What's going on?" Minori-san was openly surprised.

Matoba-san pulled a notebook out of the inside pocket of his business suit. Then he licked his finger and started flipping pages, an immensely bureaucrat-esque gesture that looked oddly appropriate for him.

"We want members of the Eldant expeditionary force, including yourself, to take some vacation time. Specifically, about three shifts' worth."

"Huh?" Minori-san blinked.

"It seems you haven't properly taken vacation since you arrived here."

"Vacation time... I guess that is something I get, isn't it?" Minori-san said with an amused look.

It was true that since I had come here, Minori-san had been "on the job" as my bodyguard pretty much 24/7. Except for when we were sleeping, we were practically attached at the hip.

"Indeed you do. And if you don't use it up, at least on paper, it will mean trouble for us. Thus, I would like the lot of you to take some time off —say next week?"

"So you'll be able to take a break too, Captain Satou?" Minori-san asked, addressing the man standing beside Matoba-san.

Hmm, so Captain Satou was his name. He had a square chin, narrow eyes, a craggy nose, and overall conveyed the earnestness of a down-home country kid. He wore the JSDF uniform well. I had seen him before, like at the soccer tournament and when dealing with the dragon, but I realized I had never spoken to him. I knew him by appearance, but I would have hesitated to call him an acquaintance. And he was a captain—a pretty big deal, then.

"That's right," Captain Satou said. "Our unit will take breaks by shifts."

"And how do you plan to spend your vacation, sir?"

Captain Satou smirked. “Our unit is officially posted to the Middle East for PKO, so we could hardly go back to Japan. There must be some tourist sites here in Eldant. We have our magic rings, so language won’t be a problem.” He held up his hand to display the ring he was wearing.

These rings were a crucial part of how we Japanese communicated (telepathically, that is) with the people of the Eldant Empire. Two people both wearing magic rings could be speaking different languages—Japanese and the local tongue, for example—and the rings would “translate” everything instantly.

I was wearing such a ring myself, and the JSDF forces dispatched to Eldant got them as well. They also functioned as a status symbol, and people wearing them were treated—not quite as nobles, but certainly better than the average commoner. Within the borders of the empire, the soldiers wouldn’t have any trouble doing some sightseeing.

“So there you have it,” Matoba-san said. “I’ll send around a memo tomorrow or the next day detailing who will be off when. How you spend your time off is of course up to you. Spread your wings, my dear Koganuma-kun.”

“Yes, sir. .....Spread my wings...?” It was a weird order, coming from a superior. “I don’t know if that’s something I can do on command.”

“By the way, Shinichi-kun, you should take a bit of a break as well.” It was an uncharacteristically considerate thing for Matoba-san to say to me. I wasn’t sure what could be behind it. I guess if I were to collapse from overwork, it wouldn’t make his life any easier.

“How to spend vacation time,” I said, crossing my arms and looking thoughtful. “Usually vacation is a chance to refresh yourself, I guess. Refresh. Refresh...”

“In Japan, it’s about time for beachgoing,” Captain Satou said, narrowing his eyes.

“Beachgoing?” Petralka said suddenly, blinking. “That is it. Beachgoing!”

“Huh?” I offered.

“In an anime I saw recently, the protagonist suggested beachgoing to refresh himself. Is this not the basic method of restoring one’s spirits in Japan?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, thinking back on the show Petralka had been watching. “That was the swimsuit episode, wasn’t it? I guess you always

wind up with one of those eventually.”

“‘Swimsuit episode’? What is that?”

Petralka picked up immediately on an expression that I hadn’t given any thought. The loli(-ish) empress was, in her own way, hungrier than anyone in the nation for otaku culture.

“Well, it’s, uh—that anime you were watching, Petralka, it was really aimed more at guys, so... And guys are like, uh, happy to see cute girls in swimsuits. And so, well, the show’s producers want their audience to be happy, so sometimes they include an episode where all the girl characters are in swimsuits. I guess you could say it’s just kind of the way things are done in the Japanese television or anime industry...”

I was trying to explain the concept, but it was turning out to be remarkably difficult. Incidentally, the reason that Petralka’s magic ring wasn’t translating expressions like ‘beachgoing’ and ‘swimsuit episode’ was because her language lacked equivalent concepts. She was just using foreign expressions she had heard in her anime wholesale.

“I see,” she said, “so this is your so-called ‘swimsuit episode’?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“And do they make you happy too, Shinichi?”

“Well, sure!” I exclaimed, clenching my fist. “Swimsuit episodes are an oasis for the heart! Even the grimmest, darkest stories can shore up viewers with a swimsuit episode, preparing them to endure whatever awful plot twist comes next! Any heroine ought to get at least one chance to shine in a __”

“W-We don’t entirely follow. But they please you, is this not so?”

“Absolutely!”

“Very well.” Petralka gave an emphatic nod. “Then let us have our own ‘swimsuit episode’!”

“Huh...?” I said stupidly. What was going through this crazy monarch’s loli head?

“Thus we declare that we shall accompany you on your trip to the ocean!”

“Wha... I... Ahh...”

Personally, I had no reason to object to Petralka’s coming along. But she was the empress. Any time she went anywhere, it was likely to turn into a pretty big affair.

“But wait,” Minori-san said with a puzzled look. “I thought there weren’t any oceans around here. Isn’t Eldant landlocked?”

Oh yeah. She was right.

There were no oceans in Eldant.

That wasn’t to say there were no oceans in this entire world; just that Eldant didn’t border on any of them. Thus the idea of going to the ocean would have meant an excursion to a foreign country—and that would have brought its own challenges.

But then she said, “I guess it doesn’t necessarily have to be an ocean.”

“We have not been to the sea ourself,” Petralka said, but then added triumphantly, “but one of the royal retreats outside the capital does have a large lake. It is plenty big enough to swim in!”

“There you have it, I guess, Minori-san.”

“Sounds good to me.” I was actually a little surprised how quickly Minori-san got on board. “I’ll buy swimsuits for everyone—as a gift!”

In fact, she was practically raring to go.

Matoba-san and Captain Satou watched the scene with a touch of amusement.

Looking back on it, this was when I should have started to suspect.

I should have realized a nefarious plot was brewing behind the carefree conversation.

It was a picture out of paradise itself.

Beautiful women younger and older alike frolicked beside the lake. Granted, at the edge of my vision I could see the “bare butlers”—that is, the knights in their so-called swimsuits—but I chased them out of my consciousness and tried to focus entirely on all the glory I could see before my eyes.

“Yah!” Minori-san gave a cheerful shout and gently smacked a yellow-and-white beach ball. It went sailing over toward Myusel.

“Eh? Wha? T-To me?! Ohh, I—I’ve got it!” She flailed around a bit, but managed to hit the incoming ball. This was probably her first experience of playing a game like this, but nonetheless—whether because she had muscles, or just through sheer luck—the ball spiked up into the air and went flying again, this time toward Petralka.

“Hrm? So now it is our turn!” She smacked the ball, which now headed for Elvia. She must not have hit it in quite the right place, because rather than bouncing up in the air, the ball went flying straight toward the other girl. It was not going to be easy to return. Normally, this was where the ball would drop to the ground and the volley would be over.

But this was Elvia. A beast girl. Her reflexes and physical abilities were on a different level from the rest of us.

Her tail stood straight up as she prepared to meet the incoming ball. And then...

“Yarf!”

In the blink of an eye, she made her move—but rather than hitting the ball, she launched herself into the air and wrapped all four of her limbs around it.

“I can’t control myself!”

“Ahhhh...” I let out a sigh as I watched her roll around in the sand with the ball. I might have guessed this would happen.

“Elvia!” Petralka said sharply. “Will you not give back the ball!” Her female knights quickly moved to chase down the beast girl. But Elvia, still holding the ball, rolled away at a terrific pace (how this worked was something of a mystery), and they weren’t able to catch her.

Elvia and other beast people like her are strongly influenced by the phase of the moon. For that reason, they’ve developed a unique religious outlook in which they treat the moon as effectively divine—a view that extends to anything round that reminds them of that celestial body.

I suppose a yellow-and-white beach ball the perfect size for hugging to yourself does look a bit like the moon. It seemed like we had run afoul of Elvia’s instincts.

“And after I said all those times that you would never get a game of beach volleyball going with Elvia involved,” I said.

“But we couldn’t let Elvia-san be the only one left out,” Myusel said.

In the end, the knights couldn’t catch Elvia; they gave up the chase while Elvia, covered in sand, happily played with the ball by herself.

“How about another game, then?” Minori-san suggested. “Your Highness, Shinichi-kun, Myusel. How about watermelon busting?”

“Watermelon busting?” I asked in surprise. “Did you bring any watermelons, Minori-san?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Then she shouted in the direction of the beast girl, “Elvia! Come here a moment!”

Elvia actually looked up when Minori-san shouted. “Yes? You want me?” Maybe she had played with the ball enough to restore some of her sanity.

“Elvia,” Minori-san said, “could you dig a hole here big enough for a person to climb into?”

“Not a problem! But... What are you gonna do with it?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Sure thing...”

Elvia nodded, then began burrowing into the sand with tremendous energy. It was incredible. I had seen her dig before, but the speed always staggered me. If you asked her to dig a trench, she could probably out-race an earth mover.

We watched in astonishment as a hole, comfortably big enough for a person, appeared before our eyes.

“How’s this?” Elvia asked.

“Thanks, Elvia,” Minori-san said. “All right, Shinichi-kun, you’re up next. Would you be so kind as to get in the hole?”

“You want me to get in the hole.”

“Uh-huh. Come on, get down there.”

“Hmm...”

I didn’t know what she was up to, but for the time being I decided to play along and climbed obediently into the pit. Where...

“Oooh...!”

My view was now, to use a technical term, an up shot of the various beautiful women around me! From this low angle, the curves of their thighs and above all the swell of their busts were brought out to mind-boggling effect! Ahh! Even Petralka boasted that modest but unmistakable rise and fall! Amazing! Incredible! *Minori-san, what a gift you’ve given me...!*

Etc., etc.

“Huh?”

As I was busy admiring the women, they had come up and begun piling sand around me. I felt the hole filling in like a rising tide...

“What are you guys doing?! Why are you burying me?!”

“Why, you ask?” the loli empress said loftily as she piled in some more sand. “It can only be in preparation for watermelon busting, can it not?”

“I—I don’t see how this is—”

“Watermelon busting,” Petralka said, crossing her arms, “is an old Japanese custom when at the beach in summer, in which a criminal’s head is compared to the fruit known as a watermelon and is then broken open—is this not the case? The name comes from the red color when the head is smashed, which looks much like—”

“No! That’s wrong! Who taught you that ridiculous misinformation?!”

“It’s not ridiculous or misinformation,” Minori-san said with perfect poise.

“I should have known you were behind this, you rotten WAC!” I howled, looking up at her with tears in my eyes.

It was well past the moment when I might have been able to run away. The sand was already up to my neck.

“Well, look, Shinichi,” Minori-san said, chortling as if she hadn’t had a hand in this. “It’s not like we’re using a katana or anything. I promise you won’t die.”

“I better *not*!”

“Here, I have a watermelon hat for you to wear.”

“I don’t want any watermelon hat! And what’s with that huge stick in your other hand?”

I spotted the weapon Minori-san was holding and pointed—or rather, because I couldn’t do that anymore, glared angrily at it.

No matter how you sliced it, that was a club. The classic starting weapon of so many RPGs. It was such low-level equipment that many people ridiculed it, but looking at it another way, it was what you got instead of a steel sword—and if you swung it hard enough, it could be plenty dangerous.

“You’ll be fine. Even watermelons don’t break that easily in this game.”

“And what if you’re wrong?!” I cried, but with both my arms buried, there wasn’t much I could offer by way of resistance.

And so it was that a green-and-black striped hat was shoved over my head.

“Huh! You make a pretty convincing watermelon, Shinichi-kun.”

“Minori-san, I thought you were supposed to be my bodyguard! How can you justify—”

“Today’s my day off.”

“Ahhhhhhhh crap, you’re right!”

Okay, this conversation was getting kind of stupid. But then...

“Shinichi-sama...”

A dark shadow fell across the only head I had left on this planet.

“Shinichi-sama... I just... You’re really...”

It was Elvia. Her obsession with round things had relented briefly, but I could tell from her voice that it was back now.

“Shinichi-sama, your head... Your head...!”

“Hang on, wait a second!”

“I can’t!”

An instant later, Elvia had grabbed onto my great, round watermelon head just like she had the ball earlier.

“E-Elvia—hrgh?!”

The soft, pale thing that filled my vision had to be Elvia’s thigh. Compared to Myusel or Petralka, her skin was a little more tan, a darker color, but this particular spot, perhaps because it was normally covered by her shorts, was almost white.

That’s right—my head was now clutched firmly between Elvia’s thighs. And the thing touching the back of my head—was that Elvia’s chest?

Ahhhh.

How can a situation make me so happy and so embarrassed at the same time?!

I can’t help feeling that having a girl’s chest and thighs pressed up, you know, right against my head is, uh, not very good for my upbringing as a decent young man, but—

“How scandalous! How... outrageous?”

Suddenly, I thought I saw a flash in the corner of my vision, like something catching the sunlight.

What could it be? It was over in the woods—and I didn’t think there was anything especially reflective in there.

“Minori-san!” I called to the WAC just beside me. “I think I saw a flash over there...”

“Nice try, but you’re not getting away that easy, Shinichi-kun,” she said.

“No, I swear—”

But Minori-san, probably assuming this was a scheme on my part to get out of this, ignored everything else I said and prepared for “watermelon busting.”

“All right,” she said with a cheerful smile, “who wants to go first?”

“I wanna try it!”

“You, Elvia? All right, first we blindfold you.” Minori-san wrapped a towel she’d brought around Elvia’s eyes.

This was bad. If Elvia with all her physical strength were to hit me, especially on or around her “phase,” my head really might split open like a fruit, no matter what she was hitting me with.

No, wait, Shinichi. It’s all right. You’ve nothing to fear.

Elvia was a beginner at watermelon busting. It wouldn’t be that easy for her to figure out where I was. What I needed to do now was not inadvertently give away my position by groaning or something, but instead to remain as quiet and inconspicuous as a stone by the roadside, and wait for Elvia to miss me...

“Okay, spin, spin!” Minori-san called out, spinning Elvia around. Now she wouldn’t even know which direction I was in.

That’s right, there had never been any reason to feel—

“Shinichi-sama!” Elvia exclaimed, confident despite the blindfold. “I might be blindfolded, but I know you by your scent! Ooh, you’re gonna be so busted!”

“No, stooooooooppppp!”

I might die here by this lake today.

That was the realization that fueled my desperate scream.

Amidst the thick, dark underbrush hid two men in camouflage.

This wasn’t the sort of camouflage that had come to be a fashion statement, a simple pattern of mixed green and brown and black. This was far more than color... The men hardly looked human.

They wore cloth that appeared plant-like, covered in a profusion of thread, as if the uniforms themselves were some kind of vegetation. So-called “ghillie suits.”

Of course, they wouldn’t wear such serious disguises without making sure everything else was on the same level. Their faces were daubed with camouflage paint, and their scopes, which could all too easily catch the light, were kept covered unless they were in use.

From even a slight distance, the men vanished completely into the foliage. In fact, someone could be standing right next to them and not notice the men as long as they didn't move.

The two men were currently observing their target.

This was, of course, a preliminary step. When they had an opportunity, when the time was right, the men were authorized to proceed with the operation. Everything they carried *and wore* was for that purpose.

It was quite some distance from the bushes where the men waited to the lakeside. The cheerful shouts of the girls playing in the sand didn't even reach them. What tickled the men's eardrums was nothing more than an occasional sibilance of leaves in the wind and the calls of birds in the trees.

The man crouched on the left, watching Shinichi and his friends through a powerful scope, muttered, "Awfully carefree, aren't they?"

What the man saw through his scope was a girl with a wooden club working her way over to a boy wearing a watermelon hat. The boy was buried up to his neck in the sand, completely immobilized. The girl, who had ears and a tail like a dog, proceeded straight toward him despite the fact that she was blindfolded, and brought the club down.

The club missed the boy's head, gouging into the sand.

"Lucky kid," the man grunted. "Got away with his head in one piece."

The whole group was playing innocently, completely unaware of him and the other man watching them. They obviously didn't suspect anything. Even the knights who would normally be guarding them were wearing swimsuits and had even joined the circle.

"Let 'em have their fun while they still can," said the man beside him, his spotter, who was looking through a large spotter scope. "Playtime'll be over pretty soon." His voice was totally emotionless. "I'll bet they'd never dream they're being targeted from here."

Wrapped in their camouflage clothing, melting into the vegetation around them, the men were now little more than machines focused on their mission.

"By the time they notice us, it'll be too late," the spotter said, not taking his eye from his scope.

"You're right about that," his companion replied. "Now, enough chatter. It's time to get down to business."

He focused once more on tracking his target with his scope. The spotter resumed watching as well.

In the end, I survived the nightmare game of watermelon busting without anyone actually cracking my head open.

I mean, do you even usually use a word like "survived" for watermelon busting? When did it become such a dangerous activity?

"That was not pleasant," I groaned. Elvia had dug me out of the hole, and now I was wobbling my way over toward a big beach umbrella Minori-san had set up. I hadn't moved at all during that game, not one finger, but I was tired down to my bones.

As I sheltered under the huge umbrella, Myusel gave me something to drink. Granted, in a world with no coolers or refrigerators, it wasn't an ice-cold, refreshing soft drink, but still.

"You looked like you were having so much fun, Shinichi-sama."

"I did? When?"

Personally, I had been battling fear of severe brain damage the entire time, but I guess to Myusel it had looked like I was enjoying myself.

“Wait—whoa!”

I casually sipped the tea Myusel gave me, and my eyes went wide. It was cold. Obviously much colder than the surrounding environment.

“What’s the story here? This is cold.”

“Oh, I used magic...” Myusel sounded a little bit shy.

“Cooling magic? Do you know that sort of thing?”

I knew she could use fire magic, and wind magic, and healing magic, and that unlike me—someone who was still learning the ropes—she could apply them in a variety of ways. But...

“No, sir. Minori-sama taught me...”

Myusel said she had put the pot of tea in a larger container, filled the container with water, and then hit the water with carefully modulated wind magic.

That’s right: vaporization. When water evaporates, it takes heat from the surrounding area with it. By using wind to lower the humidity level of the surface of the water, the water would naturally start to evaporate, and the water that remained would be colder. Which, of course, would cool the teapot as well.

“So you continuously used wind magic, keeping an eye on the strength the entire time?”

“Yes, sir,” Myusel said with a nod. “I so wanted you to be able to enjoy a cold drink...”

“What consideration!” I exclaimed. This was a truly sweet and kind maid-san. “But Myusel, part of the reason we came here was so that *you* could have some time off, too. Don’t overwork yourself, okay?”

Using so much magic, controlling the intensity all the while, had to be tiring.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Very much!” Myusel smiled. “I did some aquatic training while I was in the military, but I’ve never come to the water just to enjoy myself like this. And...”

“And... what?”

Myusel couldn’t quite look at me, but she smiled and said quietly, “It’s... my first chance to go somewhere with you, Shinichi-sama.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I could feel my heart pound.

True, it *was* our first trip together, if you didn’t count the excursion to Bahairam when I got kidnapped. But just having an adorable half-elf maid

shyly use an expression like “my first” was enough to make me desperately moe.

Argh! My chest hurts! I think I’m going to die of moe!

O white-bikini’d goddess (Shinichi vision)! Do you mean to strike me down with moe?!

And so on and so forth, me working myself into a lather over Myusel’s cuteness.

“The two of you seem quite happy *together* despite the imperial presence.”

I didn’t know when Petralka had gotten there, but she didn’t sound very pleased.

“Y-Your Majesty!” Myusel said, jumping back from me as if she’d been shot. “I— It wasn’t my intention to—”

“We think you appeared to be having fun.”

“Uh... Petralka...?”

“*We think you appeared to be having fun!*” Petralka growled, less at Myusel than at me. Her Majesty was angry—in a full-on sulk, in fact.

Myusel looked like she might weep, and as for Petralka, she continued to give me the glaring of a lifetime. What did she want from me?

“Um... What is it you want me to do?”

“You ninja-poop!”

“Ninja-poop?!”

“Or should we say, ‘Strike your head against the corner of a tofu square and die!’? Not that we know precisely what ‘tofu’ is.”

“Petralka. I think the word you’re looking for is *nincompoop*.”

“Hrm,” Petralka said, crossing her arms. “We are not sure, but in any event, you are a ninja-poop.”

“You’ve picked up some awfully strange Japanese...”

“We are given to understand that it describes a man who cannot see what’s going on around him, is that not true?”

“Er... Well, basically, yeah.”

But why would she call me something like that just because I was a little slow to notice she’d walked over?

Whatever the case, I was fretting over how to handle this situation when...

“Hmm...”

Minori-san, who had disappeared for a few minutes after the watermelon busting was over, wandered back to us. I'd figured she had some sort of errand to handle, but maybe not.

"Minori-san?"

She had a strange look in her eye. It was... hard. Like, normally she seemed so soft and gentle, but now there was a tension in her expression. Often, this look meant that she was in her "JSDF soldier" mode, that she was thinking about her job.

Could that mean there was danger nearby?

"Minori-san?" I asked again. "Did something happen?"

"Shinichi-kun," she said, "you said earlier that you saw something flash in the forest."

I thought back to the light I had seen out of the corner of my eye just before the watermelon busting began. "Yeah, I did..."

I had also been totally ignored, so I hadn't given it much thought after that.

"It just bugged me a little, and I went to have a look," Minori-san said.

"Did you learn anything?"

"Not much to speak of. There was no sign that anyone had been there..."

"Really? Nothing at all?"

Minori-san crossed her arms in front of a chest larger than anything you would expect from someone so baby-faced and tilted her head in puzzlement.

Ooh! The placement of her arms emphasized the valley between— No! This wasn't the time to be getting excited about that.

"I've had the same basic combat training as every other soldier," she said, "but I'm a lot less knowledgeable when it comes to things like guerrilla warfare and special operations."

That brought back memories of the special forces squad that had tried to kill me on one occasion.

"Rangers and the like are specialists at those kinds of things, so if someone with those qualifications were to be engaging in operations, I probably wouldn't find them."

Rangers were soldiers who had completed the Ground Self-Defense Force's Ranger Courses and were entitled to wear the Ranger badge. They learned every conceivable form of combat and shooting, and polished their

skills to an exceptionally high degree. The training included field fortifications, infiltration, air drops, waterborne infiltration, swimming while armed, emergency exfil, and every kind of fighting: in forests, at night, in the mountains, in the snow, in urban close quarters, and on and on. In other words, they were the JSDF's elite of the elite. So naturally, special-ops commands tended to be Ranger parties.

"So... Does this mean we're being targeted again?!"

I remembered all too well when the JSDF, who I had thought were on my side, came after me—with a commando unit, no less. Since that event, there hadn't been any obvious interference from the Japanese government. The prime minister had changed, and I thought their approach had gotten calmer, or at least more subtle. Maybe I was being naïve.

"I don't know yet," Minori-san said. "They might be from Eldant, or Bahairam, or some other country. Although I doubt anywhere around here would use sniper rifles."

"Sniper rifles?!"

"This is just a hunch, but I'm betting the light you saw was the reflection from a sniper scope lens. And you *were* targeted by special ops once before. If the higher-ups' feelings haven't changed, we shouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves looking down the barrel of a sniper rifle."

"So you mean some army force is after me again?!"

"We're not at home, we're not even in Marinos. Our security would naturally be lighter. Maybe they figured this was their chance."

"But that's ridiculous...!"

"I hope we can laugh it off like that," Minori-san said. I could see her eyes behind her glasses, and I could tell that she was now really and truly the soldier, Koganuma Minori.

One male knight walked through the dim forest.

He was one of Garius's direct subordinates, a distinguished and discerning man even among knights. There were more than a thousand knights in the Holy Eldant Empire, but not even a hundred of them reported directly to Garius. This man was still young, but his family background was impeccable, and he could expect to one day have a hundred or two hundred knights of his own reporting to him. In other words, an elite.

He didn’t speak as he walked through the woods. This forest was a fair distance from the lake, and the voices of Petralka and the others didn’t reach him. In fact, silence reigned around him.

The knight had received orders from Garius not to let anyone into the area near the lake.

The orders weren’t for this man alone, of course. There were more than thirty hand-picked knights patrolling the area, protecting it from any outside threats.

Garius judged that having a bunch of stern-looking men in full armor wandering around would make it hard to relax, and so he had chosen to station the empress’s royal guards as a second line of defense.

From the capital, the lake was a long ride even by bird-drawn carriage, and only fishers and woodspeople lived in the area. They had all been strictly ordered not to leave their homes for the day.

This all might be considered paranoia, but the time the empress had been kidnapped by the Assembly of Patriots still cast a long shadow over the empire’s thinking, and Garius and the other ministers expended no small amount of effort on protecting their leader.

The knight walked wordlessly through the forest.

There wasn’t a sound around him.

He had stuck cloth to the seams of his armor to mute any clanking of metal, and the leaf mold on the ground absorbed even the sound of his footsteps. The only noises to speak of were the occasional twig snapping under his boot, and the twittering of songbirds—nothing else disturbed the quiet.

The canopy blocked out the strong sunlight, and although shafts of sun broke through in places, for the most part the woods were dark.

“Sigh...” the knight exhaled, and then suddenly he stopped walking.

Wasn’t this whole thing futile?

He knew it was wrong, but he couldn’t stop the thought from occurring to him.

Nothing was happening. He was just walking back and forth around the same little spot. The work was mundane, *boring*, a far cry from the glorious life he had expected as a knight.

“No,” he told himself after a second, shaking his head. “This is part of a knight’s duty. The honorable work of protecting the person of the Empress. I will not neglect it.”

If nothing happened, that was a good thing. If all their patrolling ended in no more than tired legs, it would show that they really had done their job to protect Her Majesty.

Having thus reconsidered his situation, the knight focused afresh on the space around him.

A second later, though, he gasped as someone or something reached out from behind him, clapping a hand over his mouth.

Were they being attacked?!

But he hadn't sensed anyone—he, a knight. He had a fair amount of confidence in his martial abilities, regardless of the discipline. He could use sword and bow. He knew horseback riding. Even hand-to-hand combat. He knew that against anything less than a professional opponent, he could emerge victorious without even drawing his blade.

And yet he had so readily allowed this person to get behind him, which in combat was equivalent to begging for death.

He was so shaken that it took him a moment to properly understand what had happened to him. As he reached for the sword at his belt, though, a voice whispered in his ear.

"*...Koe wo dasu na.*"

It was low, a man's voice. It spoke in a foreign language the knight had never heard before, but the meaning was clear enough. He felt a touch of cold metal against his neck—presumably a blade. *Make a sound and you die* was the obvious message.

The knight grunted softly behind the hand covering his mouth.

If he made a careless move, he would be killed. But was there any guarantee that just going along at this moment would save him?

If not, then he had to resist, even at the cost of his life; he had to let his brethren know of the danger.

As he was having this thought, though, the voice said, "*Sugu ni, raku ni shite yaru.*"

Then the knight felt the hand on his neck tighten. The blood that should have made it to his brain was cut off, and shortly thereafter he lost consciousness.

The body of the unconscious knight was dragged into the bushes.

And then the forest returned to silence, as if nothing had even happened.

The shimmering sun was high in the southern sky—it was almost midday, and we were all resting under the big sun umbrella.

Everyone had worn themselves out playing during the morning, but they also agreed—especially Myusel and Elvia and the others—that they still hadn't played enough.

For me and Minori-san, the Japanese here, going to the seashore (okay, the lakeshore—close enough) in summer, putting on swimsuits and playing in the water was just normal, but I guess it wasn't something they often did in the Eldant Empire. It probably didn't help that the nation was landlocked.

So although everyone looked a little confused at first, once they caught on to how much fun it could be, they got super into it.

I include Petralka and her female knights in that statement. This lake was officially an imperial retreat, land open only to the empress and her family, but it appeared that their use of the water consisted mainly of going on lazy boat rides; putting on a swimsuit to run and swim was not part of the agenda.

Not to mention, for the empress to clown around with people of lower station like this was practically unheard of. And if it ever had been heard of, I'm sure it hadn't been welcomed or approved of. That was just the nature of class differences. But now...

"The 'o-bentou' you make are indeed delicious, Myusel," Petralka said as she sampled lunch from our picnic basket.

When you picture an empress eating, you probably imagine a white tablecloth lined with an array of knives and forks—but none of that could be found here. All the games hadn't just made people tired, but hungry too, and they wanted something they could chow down on quickly.

"This 'onigiri' is a food from Ja-pan, is it not?"

"Yes, Majesty. I've been learning from Minori-sama."

Minori-san and I had ended up as the catalysts for an otherwise uncommon meeting of royal and commoner. We were effectively treated as nobles, but what we really were was citizens of a foreign country, not nobility. We weren't technically commoners, either, but instead had the flexibility to move freely between the two—and that alone naturally helped close the gap.

Even granting that Petralka and Myusel were a special case, Garius and the female knights had started to talk directly to Myusel and Elvia, at least a few words at a time—they must have been tired of constantly having to go through me and Minori-san.

"Hm. At first we found this dark 'nori' of yours unpleasant, but in fact the taste is delicious! We understand it is made from an underwater plant?"

"Seaweed, technically," I said.

"Hrm? Are these different? They are both frequently used in foreign cooking..."

Petralka openly praised Myusel's culinary skills as she munched on a big riceball.

And she was right: I was Japanese, and even I found Myusel's cooking delicious. Just the right amount of salt; the consistency not too hard and not too soft.

Some people might dismiss it as just a riceball. But the simpler something is, the more difficult it is to pursue its true essence. It can't come apart in your hand, but it should melt when you put it in your mouth. I'll bet even Minori-san didn't expect Myusel to master making onigiri so thoroughly in such a short time. Maybe this was Myusel's particular genius. She might even be able to swing sushi, if maybe not at the level of a master with years of training.

I was mulling this over, riceball in hand, when—

"Um... Shinichi-sama? Is it not to your liking?"

Myusel was looking at me, concerned.

"No, it's delicious."

"Really? Thank goodness..." Her face softened into a relieved smile.

I was flattered that I could make her so happy with just a few simple words. *The true spice to this food is your beautiful smile.* Yeah, sure. If I could say that sort of thing with a straight face, maybe I could actually get somewhere with someone, but just thinking about it made my stomach clench.

"Sensei!"

At that moment, I heard a familiar voice. I looked over to see a tall boy and a short girl walking over.

It was the elf, Loek, and the dwarf, Romilda. Both were pupils at my school—in other words, my students.

Elves and dwarves didn't usually get along, and these two had once been known to fight about every little thing, but I felt like I was seeing them together more and more often. Would it be giving myself too much credit to imagine I was the "catalyst" for this, too...?

"Sorry to crash your party, sensei!" Loek said, looking pleased with himself.

The parents of both of these students possessed a certain standing in the empire. Despite being an elf—a demi-human—Loek's father had enough stature to stand in the imperial council, and that must have been how Loek got wind of us coming here.

Which was all well and good, but...

"Sensei! When I heard you and the other teachers were coming here to escape the heat—well, I just couldn't sit still!" Loek said.

"And I came along to keep an eye on this dumb-elf..."

"What are you two doing here?!" a swimsuit-clad female knight demanded.

"Uh..." The sudden shouting set both newcomers back on their heels.

The knights advanced with their hands on their swords. It was Minori-san who stopped them.

"These kids are okay. They're our students."

"Hrm. Is... Is that so..." The knights didn't look prepared to accept this immediately, but they let go of their weapons—and Loek and Romilda.

"But as for you," Minori-san said, narrowing her eyes at our visitors, "how did you get here? No one but us is supposed to be allowed in right now. Didn't any of the patrols stop you?"

At the moment, the area was being diligently patrolled to prevent anyone unauthorized from getting close. From what I had heard, something like thirty knights were on the job. There was no way a couple of laypeople like Loek and Romilda could have just waltzed in here.

And yet here they were.

"We... didn't see anyone," Loek replied, surprised.

He had no reason to lie, so it must have been true that they hadn't run into any guards.

"Hmm. What are Reydas and the others doing?" Garius, an uncharacteristic cloud on his face, pulled out a magic crystal, maybe something he used to communicate with his knights. "What's the point of having patrols if they're just going to let a couple of kids—"

Here were Loek and Romilda, who had reached us without being delayed by a single knight.

Could that be just luck? Were the knights being lazy?

Or else...

"No way..." I remembered the flash I had seen earlier. Hadn't Minori-san said that it could be a sniper rifle?

"I think something might have happened!" I said to Garius in a panic. "We'd better investigate!"

"I agree, Minister Cordobal," Minori-san said. "I think it might be best to get your knights together and do a head count."

I had been told that Garius's subordinates were true elites, even among the ranks of Eldant's knights. They had to be skilled in every kind of combat, of course, but they also had to have good personalities and above-par mental fortitude. I couldn't imagine them abandoning their duty.

And that meant there had to be something else going on. Like, say, that they had somehow been rendered unable to patrol.

"Minori-san is right," I said. "Something may have happened to them. We really need to go make sure that—"

But Garius shook his head, interrupting me. "No," he said. "Calm yourself, Shinichi, and you, Minori. I know my knights better than anyone. I doubt there's any cause for concern. I think a bout of significant luck may account for these children."

"But..."

"There's no need to worry." His expression softened a little. "I'll send one of the female knights to make contact. And in the unlikely event that someone did breach our perimeter, we have the female knights here with us. Were this boy and girl not stopped by that very line?"

He was right; Loek and Romilda had found themselves confronted by the royal contingent. But still...

"You must have more faith in us," Garius said firmly, and there was nothing more I could say.

The water was still and calm. It was clear, but the light could only reach down so far, and this particular spot was as opaque as if ink had been

spilled into the water. The wind caused occasional little ripples, along with quiet splashes, but otherwise there was no sign of movement.

The water, and everything about it, was quiet.

Then, with no warning, a greenish shadow began to surface. It was almost as if the water itself was bubbling up—and then breaking. Out of the receding water appeared a strange but unmistakably human face. A carbon-Kevlar helmet, along with black-and-green face paint, made it hard to immediately recognize the figure as human because of the color and shape. The figure emerged up to its nose, causing only the slightest of ripples.

It never made a sound.

Maybe the first figure was scouting out the situation, because others soon appeared from the water in the same way. They breathed quietly through their noses, looking left and right—and then they disappeared beneath the water again.

A short while later, the alien figures reappeared in a spot a short distance away, looked around again, and then once again submerged.

They repeated this process several times. The men changed their position just a little each time, coming closer.

Closer to what?

Of course, it was...

None of the men spoke a single word. They didn't need to.

The silhouette leading them glanced back at the shapes behind him. They all returned his gaze, silent. They could give and receive signals with just a look, and they were advancing inexorably on their target.

Slowly but surely, unnoticed.

After we'd had lunch and rested for a bit, we set about playing again.

I was still worried about the flash and the knights, but Garius insisted everything was fine, so I couldn't really press the matter. Plus, I didn't want to make Myusel and the others any more nervous than I had to, so we decided to go on with our plans.

And thus...

"K-Keep a good hold! Absolutely do not let go!" Petralka said with what could have been taken for desperation.

She said she had never been swimming, so I had gone into the lake with her to teach her. As I'd expected, in a landlocked country like Eldant, the majority of people who had never served the army and therefore hadn't received aquatic training didn't know how to swim. Garius, as a knight, could handle himself in the water, but for Petralka this was all new. It sounded like she had never even put her face underwater. Swimming was nothing like washing your face; she knew you couldn't breathe and that it was all too easy to suck in water and suffocate, so she seemed to have a healthy fear of drowning.

That was why I decided to start by taking her out to where the water was no deeper than her ankles so she could get used to it. Then we would work on actually getting into the water, and finally on the basics of swimming—a bog standard pool training regimen.

"If you take your hands away, we shall die!"

"Uh-huh. Don't worry, Your Majesty, I know. I won't let you go, so go ahead and kick."

Petralka really must have been afraid of putting her face in the water, because she executed her flutter kicks with her head held as high as she could.

Unfortunately, a person has to put their head down in order to float. Otherwise, the lower body just progressively sinks. The head is the heaviest single part of the human body, so with it sticking up in the air, it's impossible to float. It only makes sense.

Understanding a physical principal like that, though, and getting your body to act on it are two different things.

"Shinichi! Do you think your teaching method may be flawed? We are kicking just as you said, yet we continue to sink!"

"I told you, you have to put your face in the water if you want this to work!"

"B—But!"

"Come on, just try it."

"We do not wish to! You, teach us to float without putting our face in the water!"

"It just doesn't work that way..."

And there you had it. Kanou Shinichi's Swim Lessons, gone for naught thanks to the stubbornness of their only pupil.

Myusel, watching from nearby, said, "Er, ahem, Your Majesty? I learned to swim in the military. If you wish, perhaps I could teach—"

"Leave us be, Myusel! We are happy like this!"

"Er...?" It seemed like this surprised me more than it did Myusel.

What did she mean, she was happy? Practically since we'd started, it had been a constant stream of "You are a terrible teacher" and "Are you *sure* you know how to swim?"

Or did she really mean that she liked teasing me more than learning anything about being in the water? That would be one sadistic empress...!

"But Petralka, instead of having me bumble through this, I bet it would be a lot faster to have someone who learned to swim here help you—"

"Silence, knave! We shall learn how to swim in the Ja-panese style, from you, Shinichi!"

"Uh... Sure..."

"And Myusel, you must be more sensitive!"

"Yes? I—I'm very sorry!" She blinked as if to say she wasn't quite sure what she was apologizing for, but nonetheless bowed her head and withdrew.

"Now, let us resume our lesson! Shinichi, make sure you're holding our hands!" She re-tightened her grip on me. The loli(-ish) empress returned to kicking her legs, holding my hands—and still keeping her face out of the water.

"Look, you've got to get your face down."

"We shall not! This way is more fun!"

"Fun?"

"Er... What we mean is, you should not complain, but do as your empress commands!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty..."

I half-sighed, but clasped her hands as instructed.

I knew how much Petralka had to put up with by virtue of being empress. When I thought of all that, I figured there was no harm in indulging her a little bit. A lot of people saw her as the empress before they saw her as just a young woman, so she always had to watch what she was saying. Maybe that had built up until it expressed itself this way.

"Shinichi-kun!"

I heard my name from the shore just about the time Petralka was finally beginning to lower her face as she kicked.

Still holding the empress's hands, I looked over my shoulder. The first thing I saw was an ample bosom wrapped in a black bikini, bouncing as it approached me at high speed.

Ohhh! What volume! What bounciness!

It was pretty stimulating for a healthy young man of my age.

"Ohhh..."

The assault of the bouncing boobs upon my instincts caused me to completely forget what I was currently doing.

Which is to say, I let go of the hands I was holding.

"Hrfp! Hack! Coughgh!"

Ack! C-Crap! The sight of that bouncing bust had caused me to totally forget about Petralka for an instant...!

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Petralka exclaimed, somehow managing to grab onto my body and try to pull herself up.

"S-Sorry about that...!"

"And after we instructed you so many times not to let go of us—"

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry!"

And I did feel guilty. But *boobs*—those boobs were calling to me! They jiggled up and down, calling my name as they got ever nearer! What young man wouldn't find his mind full of them? Innocent on account of boobies, right?!

A great deal of basically meaningless self-defense was rushing through my brain at that moment.

"Shinichi-kun, Your Majesty! It's terrible!" the boobs—I mean, Minori-san—said as she came up to us, not trying to hide the panic on her face. "Your Majesty, we can't account for the full number of knights assigned to patrol duty!"

"What's this?" Petralka asked, frowning. She was still hanging off me in roughly the same way as a koala bear, so between us we looked pretty silly, but forget about that for a moment. "Tell us more, Minori!"

"Right..."

Minori-san said that the female knight Garius had sent to check on the patrols never came back, so he dispatched a further pair of knights. They discovered that of the thirty male knights on patrol, over half—twenty individuals—were missing. They were on a triple shift with ten people

resting at a time, with each knight assigned to a specific area. But allegedly, the twenty men who had been out patrolling never came to switch shifts.

"And what's the meaning of this?" Petralka asked, going pale. "Have twenty of Garius's picked men disappeared without the other ten even noticing?"

"What Minori says is true, Your Majesty."

One more person approached us—the bare butler himself, Garius.

"And I don't believe it will be possible to fully protect the imperial retreat with just ten male and four female knights. I suggest we tighten the perimeter and withdraw promptly." He squinted at us. "Without knowing how numerous our enemies are, we cannot fight them."

"'Enemies'..." Petralka's eyes widened at the word. "So you think those knights were felled by something or someone?"

"Every one of them was a skilled warrior, elite fighters who understood vigilance. I cannot imagine that even one of them would deliberately abandon their post, let alone all of them together. I think it's reasonable to suspect that they were overcome by something."

We all looked at each other, silent. Our nightmares were coming true in the worst way possible. An enemy was close. Someone or something powerful enough to take out twenty trained knights without making a sound.

Most likely soldiers, armed with modern tactics and weaponry. Otherwise, I couldn't fathom what could have done this to Garius's men.

Wait... The sniper rifle. Why haven't they picked us off yet?

The idea bugged me. Why would they need to whittle down our patrol? We were totally vulnerable, absorbed in playing in the lake. They should have been able to snipe us any time they felt like it.

So why didn't they?

The idea that they were draining our fighting strength was supremely unsettling, not least because we had no idea why. Could it be that killing wasn't their objective? That they meant to capture someone here as a hostage?

When it came to candidates for hostages around here, the obvious choices were Petralka or Garius.

Or maybe... me.

Loek and Romilda were both from noble families, so they would have some value as captives. But they hadn't arrived until after the number of

knights started to drop, and more importantly, nobody but them had even known that they were going to show up. I doubted the “enemy” knew something like that if we didn’t.

Still, if they take a hostage, what do they do then? Negotiate with the Holy Eldant Empire? Things have been so quiet, though—why now? Did a change in leadership produce a new policy? Or...

I couldn’t seem to get my thoughts straight.

And I certainly had no idea what this enemy of ours was after.

Even though it was the middle of the day, everything around us was covered by a clinging darkness.

The dense foliage blocked out the sunlight. A few shafts of sun poked through the trees, so it was at least possible to see what was around us—but the view felt awfully confined.

On top of that, the soft leaf mold underfoot gave us the impression that we were sinking into the ground with every step we took. Tree roots poked up here and there, a hazard that could easily trip an unwary traveler.

In short, this wasn’t a place that was made for walking. I felt a pang of sympathy when I thought of the knights who’d had to patrol here.

“All right,” I said, brushing sand off my body and looking around. “Show time.”

The vegetation was especially thick here. If an enemy were wearing camouflage, he might be standing right next to you and you wouldn’t notice.

I thought back to what had happened about fifteen minutes earlier.

I’d had just one idea about how to deal with an enemy we couldn’t see.

Assuming they were part of the JSDF, or were otherwise armed with modern weaponry, we couldn’t hope to beat them in a straight fight. We might not even be able to run away. When it came to the hunt, pros might as well be a different form of life from amateurs like us. Confronting them head-on would be the most foolish possible choice.

And so we decided to do something unorthodox.

Specifically...

“Elvia,” I called to the beast girl who was swimming in the lake. She was somehow managing to kick up geysers of water to either side even

though she was just doing the doggy paddle. “I need your help. Can you dig another hole like you did earlier?”

“A hole? Well, not to brag, but holes are kind of my specialty!” She gave a little snort. “But, uh... why?”

Minori-san grabbed one of Elvia’s floppy ears and whispered, “Well...” Slowly but unmistakably, Elvia’s expression tightened into one of anxiety.

When all was said, she replied, “I get it. I’m happy to help however I can!”

And what was our battle plan?

First, in order to throw the enemy off, we would deliberately appear to continue to just keep playing. Another game of “watermelon busting.”

So, just like that morning, Elvia dug another hole.

Earlier, she had popped out of the pit and I had climbed in—but this time, Elvia didn’t emerge. I climbed in after her, then Minori-san and Myusel, along with the female knights, filled the hole in.

As they did so, I proceeded through the tunnel Elvia had dug.

Once the hole was covered, the girls set up a beach ball impersonating my head and covered it with the watermelon hat, then Myusel and the others proceeded to start busting. It would look to the enemy like I was trapped, just as I had been that morning.

While whoever was after us was distracted, Elvia and I would surface somewhere well distanced from everyone else and go to the bird-drawn carriage we had used to get here. Our lizardman couple, Brooke and Cerise, were waiting there as drivers. We would link up with them and catch the enemy from behind...

To be perfectly honest, it was a ridiculous idea, one that I would never normally have even considered trying. But this wasn’t Japan; it was another world, it was the Holy Eldant Empire. A world where it wasn’t actually surprising to see lizardmen and werewolves walking around—and most likely, modern Japanese thinking didn’t account for their special talents.

Elvia’s tunnel-digging, for example, I could only describe as incredible. I had expected this to take about half an hour and had worried (among other things) that I might be buried alive in the process, but neither of those things came true; we soon found ourselves above ground, just near the woods.

“Phew, glad that went so well!” Elvia said, grinning from ear to ear, her face covered in dirt and sand. “I’m so glad my digging skills could help us

out!”

“And us,” said Brooke, “we need simply find this ‘enemy,’ yes?”

We had another unexpected ability on our side—the lizardmen’s senses. Reptiles have what you might call a type of infrared sensor built right into their bodies. With their so-called pit organs, they can search out even animals that are trying to hide. Standard camo wouldn’t fool these two.

“That’s right. Please?” I said. “You’re the only ones who can do this.”

“I must say, Master, those are words to get one’s blood stirring,” Brooke said. “Don’t y’ agree?”

“Indeed,” Cerise said with a nod.

Unlike elves or werewolves, lizardman expressions can be hard to read, but I had the faint sense that Brooke was grinning.

“We’ll do all we can to help you,” he said.

“Okay then, here’s the plan,” I said. “We split up. I’ll go with Brooke, Elvia with Cerise. If anything happens, just shout as loud as you can. Don’t assume you have to handle whatever comes up on your own.”

“Got it! I’m sure Cerise-san will protect me!”

“I appreciate your confidence,” Cerise said, “but I think you’re quite capable of protecting yourself.”

Lizardmen were demi-humans, too; they had physical capabilities exceeding those of a normal human. Their main weakness was cold temperatures, but in the middle of summer like this, that wasn’t likely to matter.

“All right,” I said. Then we split up in the woods, one pair of us going left and the other right.

These woods ran from north to south along the shore of the lake. Brooke and I were checking the northern half, while Elvia and Cerise handled the southern side.

Wordlessly, Brooke and I worked our way northward. The forest got thicker and thicker. It was fearfully dark, even though I knew it was the middle of the day. Maybe not “can’t see your hand in front of your face” dark, but dark enough that you couldn’t be certain what was hiding in the denser vegetation. If there was anyone camouflaged around here, then I, with only the visible spectrum at my disposal, had no hope of finding them.

“Man, am I glad you and Cerise are here,” I said.

“I must admit I’m a bit embarrassed to be so well thought of,” Brooke replied, although I didn’t see anything resembling a blush.

“I’m just saying it because it’s true.”

“Master,” Brooke said after a moment’s pause, “you truly are a strange one.”

The conversation progressed a little bit at a time, line by line, as we worked our way through the woods, relying on Brooke’s pit organs to search. At length...

“Master,” Brooke said suddenly, coming to a halt. “There’s something over there with the same temperature as a human.”

“How many?”

“I’m not sure, but... more than just one or two.”

Were they enemies—or our missing knights? At that moment, I had no way to know. I figured it would be best to avoid immediately making direct contact.

“Let’s go around, see if we can come up from behind. If they’re enemies, we could get ourselves in trouble.”

“As you say, sir.”

Brooke started walking in a new direction, glancing to me and nodding. He seemed to be saying, *Follow me*—and implying that silence was called for from here on.

Given that he had reputedly been a great warrior once, I decided to listen to him.

We took a sharp left from the direction we had been going and began approaching whatever it was that had a similar temperature to humans. We moved as quietly as we could, trying to avoid even letting our clothes rustle.

The silence weighed heavily on me. You’d think this place would be cool from the lack of sunlight, yet I felt an unpleasant bead of sweat trickling down my forehead.

I hoped they weren’t enemies. If they happened to be our allies, the knights, that would be great.

But what if we were walking into an ambush?

I wasn’t alone—I had Brooke, a very heartening companion. But he’d said we were dealing with more than just a small number here. Maybe enough that we would have scant hope of victory if it came to a fight. That’s why I was hoping it wouldn’t. In fact, I was mostly hoping to stay out of Brooke’s way.

Hence, my plan involved doing the absolute minimum to confirm who we were dealing with.

Suddenly, Brooke stopped, pointing at a bush. He seemed to mean, *Over there*.

His tongue slid in and out of his mouth quickly. He was nervous, too.

The bush started to bother me. It seemed unnatural—sort of like it was only partly there. Like it was floating or something.

Could it be a trap? Or...

Brooke turned toward me and made a pushing gesture. I assumed he wanted me to wait here.

I nodded and crouched down. When Brooke saw that I was safely hidden, he cautiously began to approach the bush.

He reached out ever so slowly, parting the leaves—and just as I expected, they slid aside readily. I was right: it was just a fake made of dried branches.

Brooke looked back at me, and I nodded again to encourage him. He began to clear away the pretend bush—

And then stopped in shock. Underneath it were the bodies of the male knights. A female knight in a swimsuit was visible, too. For some reason, they had been lain politely on a sheet stretched over the moss and leaf detritus.

"I knew it..." I came up to Brooke and took the female knight's hand, checking her pulse. She still had one. That meant she was alive. Her heart was beating. Her body was still warm. But...

"Hm...?" Brooke made to rouse one of the male knights, but then looked puzzled.

He had discovered a hard, dark-green ball about the size of a fist.

I had seen something like it in a magazine or someplace.

It was a hand grenade.

"Brooke, get back! It's a trap!"

It was a familiar trick from war movies and such—hide a hand grenade under a dead body to get any friends who come to help the guy...!

I backpedaled as fast as I could, trying to get some distance from the bomb. Brooke started to do the same, but an instant later he yelped and flew into the air.

He hadn't jumped of his own accord. He had been pulled up, backwards. He had been caught in one of the oldest traps in the book, a rope tied to a tree.

"Brooke!"

Just for a second, I was distracted by my friend hanging there in the air. But that second was all the enemy needed. I felt something at my neck from behind me, probably a knife.

“Don’t move,” a man’s voice growled.

He was speaking Japanese.

I knew it...!

He had to be with the JSDF.

“Hrk...”

Even if I were to call out, my voice would never reach Myusel and the others. And then we would be killed. That would be it: a quick, useless death.

I could see they had a knife to Brooke, too. Something bigger, large enough to cut through underbrush—a so-called jungle knife. I didn’t think I could expect help from him.

And that was it. I was out of ideas.

Vacation? I was going to get the ultimate in time off.

I felt the despair start to press down on me.

And then...

The lakeside was home to the strangest of sights.

“What... the... hell?”

Specifically, almost a dozen camouflaged JSDF soldiers, each of them ripped.

Plus, they were sitting in a line on the ground.

Standing in front of them and staring them down, though, in a wide stance with her hands clasped behind her back, was a girl in glasses, a black bikini covering her generous endowment. And woman or not, she, too, was JSDF.

I’m referring, as you may have guessed, to Minori-san.

Towering behind her was a giant dragon—er, or actually, the giant Faldra, a transforming, dragon-shaped mecha created by Loek and Romilda on behalf of the Eldant Empire.

It had, I gathered, been their ride over here.

All this made for a perfectly surreal picture, but what made it even stranger was the silver badge that glittered on the left arm of each and every

person sitting on the ground. A diamond sitting atop a laurel wreath: the Ranger badge.

As I said before, this was proof that they were the elite of the elite of the Ground Self-Defense Force. Famous for having the most grueling training in every discipline. Earning your Ranger badge meant three long months of brutal exercises, and demanded the mental fortitude to match. I had heard all sorts of things: like how no matter what your superiors asked you to do, no matter how much abuse they heaped on you, you could only answer "Ranger!!"; no talking back was permitted; and the last four days or so of the training were an extended combat simulation in which you went with no sleep and hardly any rest of any kind.

I didn't know how much of it was actually true, of course, but it was a world a home security guard like me could hardly even imagine.

Now, these men among men sat with their equipment splayed out before them. Instead of the standard Type-89 normally issued to members of the JSDF, they had... these.

"Cameras?"

I couldn't hold back a surprised mutter. They had stocks and grips like sniper rifles—but they were cameras, with extreme telephoto lenses. This had to be what I had seen flashing in the sunlight.

There was a panoply of similar equipment as well: waterproof, high-res digital cameras; similarly water-tested high-fidelity movie cameras.

Huh.

So...

"Are they... paparazzi?"

"Shinichi-sama! Welcome back," Myusel exclaimed. She came over toward me from where she had been watching the soldiers from a distance. Petralka, Garius, and the four female knights were all there as well.

"Thank goodness you're safe!" Myusel said.

"Well, I mean, *safe*..."

Brooke and I had really been something of a diversion all along. No matter how strong Brooke might be, and even if Elvia and Cerise represented considerable physical capacity themselves, it wouldn't have been smart to try to confront the JSDF head-on. If they'd had guns, we would have been killed for sure.

That's why we had decided to scout things out first. But even then, there was a risk of being detected. So we decided that if we were spotted,

our rule would immediately change from scouting to diversion. While the enemy was focused on us, Loek and Romilda would make for the Faldra, bring it over, and exfiltrate the lot of us. That was the plan, anyway.

Based on the fact that Loek and Romilda had walked straight through the enemy's perimeter even after the knights had been taken out, I assumed a little movement wasn't going to be a problem.

"Then the two of them kindly brought the Faldra here," Myusel said. "The wind magic they were using stirred up the surface of the lake."

And just so happened to reveal the JSDF soldiers creeping towards us under the water. Strangely enough, no sooner had they been discovered than the soldiers put up their hands in a *game-over* gesture and surrendered.

What was it they were after? It didn't look like a single one of them was carrying a gun; instead, they each had a camera. Even if they were on an intelligence-gathering mission, you'd think *some* kind of weaponry would be called for...

"Captain Satou," Minori-san said. Her mouth turned up into a small smile, but behind her spectacles, her eyes weren't laughing at all. "What is the meaning of this?"

The way her arms were crossed in front of her chest pushed her boobs up, which made for a fantastic visual as far as I was concerned—but I got the feeling that a careless word to Minori-san at this moment could result in my untimely demise. She didn't have a weapon, or even really proper clothing, but she was vastly more intimidating than any of the soldiers thanks to her palpable rage.

"If you have any excuses, any pleas to make, now's the time to try them out."

"Er..." one of the soldiers said uncomfortably. I thought I recognized him. His face was covered in camouflage paint, but I could tell it was Captain Satou, the man I had seen with Matoba-san. He ran an embarrassed finger along his cheek and said, "Well, uh, calm down, Koganuma."

"I'm very calm," Minori-san said. "But I'm *not* amused by any of this. Are you aware that Shinichi-kun was attacked once before by special forces?! How much thinking does it take to realize how anxious he and I would be with you guys skulking around out there?!"

"I understand what you're saying, but we had our reasons!"

"Well, perhaps you could enlighten me, Captain Satou."

Minori-san sounded polite, but she obviously had Captain Satou by the short hairs. In a rank-based organization like the JSDF, a Private First-Class like Minori-san was farther away from someone like Captain Satou than she was from God, and for her to take him to task like this would normally be unimaginable...

"Koganuma," Captain Satou said, straightening up with a discreet cough and a less than discreet glance at Minori-san's chest. "*You're* the reason."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Your, uh... your body!" Captain Satou clenched his fist emphatically.

"I'm *sor*ry?"

"You may not know it, but there are many silent fans of yours throughout the Eldant expedition," the captain said, speaking fluently now. "When it became known that you and Kanou-kun were going to be beachgoing—or maybe I should say lakegoing in this case—in any event, that you were going to go swimming, well, the demand for a picture of you in a bathing suit was immense...!"

Minori-san was absolutely dumbfounded. I'm not sure what Captain Satou made of that, but he nodded and continued, "Requests came in for those of us who were going to be on break the same time as you to please get photographs. I myself could hardly sit still when I heard you were going to be here in a swimsuit. The thought of your profound assets—that they—the image of them cradled by a swimsuit—how could I not—!"

Captain Satou boldly made a confession that could easily have been the most embarrassing moment of his life.

Hmm. A man's man, indeed.

"Once we had agreed to the plan, the rest was easy, and our unity was unquestioned. We immediately requisitioned photographic equipment from Japan, including Russian-made items like these." He gestured toward the sniper rifle-like stock and scope. "They were only too easy for those of us accustomed to modern weaponry to use..."

Minori-san raised a beach-sandal-clad foot... and brought it down hard on the camera. There was a snapping sound from inside the long lens that made me want to cover my ears.

Yikes...!

"K-Koganuma! Do you know how much that *cost*?"

“Like I care!”

That wasn’t the end of Minori-san’s destructive rampage, either. The pro-quality digital cameras, the video recorders, equipment totaling I didn’t even know how much cash was smashed like so many toys under Minori-san’s enraged hands and feet. And it wasn’t just the cameras themselves that fell victim to her. She even pulled the memory cards out of their slots and made sure they were thoroughly mangled.

It might have looked to the untrained eye like she was just going berserk. But there was a method to her madness. She was launching kicks straight down. She was a trained martial artist, and no delicate precision equipment was going to withstand her moves.

“Ahhhh...!” The pained exclamations came not just from Captain Satou, but from every member of his unit. “Oh... Our blood and sweat and tears...”

I did, in fact, spot a genuine tear in Captain Satou’s eye. He must have really wanted those swimsuit shots of Minori-san...

“Captain Satou... and all of you!” Minori-san shouted at the seated soldiers when the destruction was over. Her shoulders were heaving. “What you’ve done is a disgrace to your Ranger abilities! Is this what you all went through three months of hell for? Is this what those badges symbolize to you?! And think about what would happen if you pulled a stunt like this and caused an international incident! If you spark a war between Eldant and Japan, how do you mean to pay for it?!”

“Erk...” Captain Satou flinched, thoroughly intimidated. After a moment, though, he said, “I will admit that this was shortsighted of us. But Koganuma, I must disagree that we’ve disgraced our capabilities as Rangers. This was not a waste of our training!” He wiped the tears from his eyes and puffed out his chest. I couldn’t quite decide if he looked really manly or completely pathetic.

“I don’t think you understand,” he said, “how many hearts will be buoyed by the pictures we took of you, or how much it will improve our morale! This is—yes, it is the love and dream of every man!”

“*There’s nothing to understand!!*”

An instant later, Minori-san’s iron fist was planted squarely in Captain Satou’s face.

Anyway, that's the story.

Several days after our adventure by the lake...

"Thank you for the other day," I said, bowing to a JSDF officer.

I was at the JSDF garrison at the training grounds on Amutech business. Today was the day that the items we'd ordered were due to arrive. Minori-san was all excited about the new BL stuff she was going to get. She'd been restless all day, and the moment we opened the door of the bird-drawn carriage, she bounded over to the containers.

"Ahh. It's you." Captain Satou greeted me with a thin smile. Despite taking Minori-san's best punch, he didn't show a single sign of injury now. I guess training really does elevate you above normal people.

With him, oddly enough, was Matoba-san.

"Say, I wanted to ask you," Captain Satou said suddenly, turning to me. "We got a good photo. Maybe you'd like to buy it?"

"I'm sorry? Photo?"

He couldn't mean...

"Gimmie."

"I like that decisiveness," Captain Satou grinned. He took the two thousand-yen bills I held out and traded me for a photograph. It was a glossy thing that showed Minori-san's bikini-clad body with remarkable clarity.

"But Satou-san..."

"Yeah?"

"I thought Minori-san smashed all your cameras. I even saw her destroy the memory cards. So where did this come from?"

"Oh, that." A corner of Captain Satou's mouth tugged up, and he seemed just the tiniest bit pleased with himself. "Under the circumstances, I'm not surprised you didn't notice. We weren't the only ones out there. There was another squad—two others, in fact."

"What?! Really?"

Captain Satou had to suppress a laugh. Was my reaction really that funny?

"They were the ones who were really tasked with taking the photographs. Our whole squad was a diversion. And by the way, all the memory cards had communications functions built in. As soon as we took a photo, they went to a simple server in the LAV. So she can smash 'em, but we've still got the data!"

Such careful preparation...!

I was belatedly shocked at how trained and prepared the JSDF was. If they had been really serious, and also out to kill us instead of photograph us, we would all have been dead by that lakeside, no question. After all, they had eliminated a squad of trained knights within just a couple of hours.

I thought back on the special ops squad that had come after me before. I saw now that their fatal flaw was that they didn't know the territory well enough. If they'd had time to train in the Eldant Empire before the attack, the outcome would have been very, very different. The thought gave me the chills.

"Well, such is strategy," Captain Satou said. "We got to see just how good we are *and* came out with some pictures of her. I'd call that a win."

"You'd do all that just for some pictures of a girl in a swimsuit? Geez, the JSDF doesn't mess around," I said. "But we're lucky it didn't become an issue, huh, Matoba-san?"

"An issue?" he asked.

"I mean, I know Captain Satou and the others were just trying to get some photographs, but they really did knock out those knights. If the Eldant Empire found out about it, I don't think they'd be happy..."

"Ah," Matoba-san said, with a meaningful look at Captain Satou. "Well, maybe I can let him in on it." Then he looked back at me. "That operation was conducted with the full knowledge of the Eldant Empire, so I don't think there will be any problems."

"Huh? The full knowledge?"

"The knights weren't in on it, though. It was the JSDF's way of teaching them a thing or two about strategy."

"Teaching strategy? What are you *talking* about?"

"Simply put, we were showing them how to fight," Captain Satou said. "Minister Cordobal and a lot of other retainers of the Eldant Empire are most interested in the Japanese military's modern tactics. We did bring down a dragon, after all."

"Ah..."

It was true: they had done it when we were filming our movie. The knights could only barely handle a dragon even with their mages to help them, yet the JSDF had done it with hardly any casualties. That's the sort of thing that would get an empire's attention.

“At the time, everyone assumed it was just a difference in firepower,” Captain Satou. “But they’ve started to think maybe it’s not just the guns. Maybe the way we fight is different, too. So they reached out to us.”

“But, uh, isn’t that sort of contrary to the policy the Japanese government is pursuing? I have to think there are all kinds of legal hurdles here...”

“No, the government was quite forward-thinking about this exercise,” Matoba-san said with a shrug. “Otherwise, we certainly couldn’t have deployed the troops.”

The government wanted this? But what in the world for?

“There was a certain instance in which the Eldant forces overcame a Japanese special ops unit, as I recall,” Matoba-san said, his voice laced with sarcasm. “That incident has caused the Eldant side to somewhat undervalue the achievements of the JSDF. To fail to give us our due, as they say. So while this was about imparting strategic principles, it was also something of a display of strength.”

“Geez...”

“Now, legally, as you say, there would be many problems with the JSDF conducting actual strategic training. We *are* a peaceful country that’s renounced war, after all. Still, though, Minister Cordobal has been most inquisitive regarding the state of our military strategy. And again, the JSDF was eager to demonstrate their capabilities to the Eldant side. So we hit upon the idea of strategic training in the form of what you might call a mock battle.”

“As shades of gray go, that’s pretty close to black...”

“The Eldant forces get to observe our tactics up close, and we get to show them just how able we are. Everybody gets what they want.”

“Uh...huh.”

Apparently, just under the surface, there had been a whole lot of shady dealings. Political maneuvering was way over my head; my only response to it was sheer exasperation. For better or for worse, though, it seemed like the Japanese government was taking a lot of different angles, and I couldn’t help being impressed by that.

“Sensei!! Satou-san!!” The voice of a boy I recognized reached us from the training ground.

“Oh—Loek?” Yes, there he was, the elf boy. “What are you doing here?”

Loek jogged up to Captain Satou, ignored my question, and instead pelted the officer with a burst of enthusiasm. “Satou-san! I hear you’re selling photos of Minori-sensei such as men treasure!”

“Hm?” Captain Satou said. Then he grinned and took Loek by the shoulders. “Quite a grapevine you’ve got, kid.”

“My burning passion for Minori-sensei makes the impossible possible!”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now... What’ve you got?”

“L-Let me see the goods first! Then we’ll talk!”

“Fine. Feast your eyes on... *this*.”

Captain Satou pulled several pictures out of his bag—photos in which the vivacious, and largely bare-skinned, Minori-san featured prominently.

“Y—Yes!! Minori-sensei’s boldly bikini’d body! Here I believed I had fixed it in my memory, and yet—! This Ja-panese technology truly is incredible! It produces such clear pictures...! What kind of ‘ca-me-ra’ did you use?!”

Loek gazed lasciviously at each of the photos with an enthusiasm that bordered on the frightening.

“Ahh, this and this and this and this! I can hardly choose! What wonderful pictures!”

“Hmm? Which wonderful pictures are you talking about, Loek?”

“All of them, obviously! I could spend my entire allowance on these without regret! These Made-in-Ja-pan magical items are just...! Don’t you agree, Romilda—”

And that was when it hit him.

“Huh?!”

Loek turned his saucer-sized eyes from the photos to what was immediately behind him. A small dwarf girl had inserted herself between me and him, standing there with her arms crossed.

“When did *you* get here?!” Loek exclaimed.

“You... You perverted elf!”

“Hrgh?!”

The next thing that hit him was Romilda. She may have been a girl, but dwarves were known for their strength. Loek’s slim body went tumbling through the air, then he crashed face-first into the ground.

Look, he’s twitching.

“Let me handle this pointy-eared creep,” Romilda said, then she grabbed Loek by the collar and dragged him away.

Captain Saotu and I watched them go. All we could do was look at each other and exchange wry smiles.

Chapter Two
Mother Arriveth

Carefully. Carreeefully.

Slowly and with utmost care, I picked up the eyeball. If I held it too tightly and it broke, that would get me nowhere. But at the same time, the slick surface meant it would slip away from me if I didn't hold it tightly enough. Actually, I had already burst two of them by pinching too hard and had dropped another while trying to carry it, where of course it broke on the ground. When holding one, you had to work within a very small window of strength.

Holding my breath, I placed the eyeball atop the face.

It settled neatly, naturally, into the hole there—the eye socket.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Now the eye was in, but there was still a lot to do. There was no nose and no mouth yet, after all.

I laid those pre-cut objects atop the white face, once again being very careful. They weren't as fragile as the eye, but they were still delicate pieces. I suddenly felt as if my hands would start shaking, and I struggled to make sure I was holding them not too tightly and not too loosely as I eased them onto the head.

"Ahh... Phew..."

It was actually starting to look like a person's face. I was once again reminded, though, of how the human face is constructed on a set of subtle symmetries. The size of the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. Their exact location. The relationship of the lines that make up the face. If any of these were even slightly off, it would look strange at best, or could even turn into an alien monster.

"Done..." I said at last, wiping the sweat from my forehead.

A girl's face looked back at me, built from a collection of parts and with absolute dedication. A featureless white lump transformed into a face with eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and hair.

But then, a bright voice from beside me exclaimed, "Me, too!" I looked over.

Working next to me was Elvia-san.

Elvia Harneiman. She was a beast person—in other words, she had ears and a tail like an animal. When just standing quietly, she didn't make much of an impression, but the moment she laughed or smiled, she became brilliant as a flower, a true display of innocence as beauty.

At the moment, her fluffy ears were flopping around happily. Apparently, she was more satisfied with her work than I was with mine.

"Whatcha think?" she asked me.

I looked at what she had done, and caught my breath.

I saw two complete young men. They were wearing disheveled clothes, and although they looked as elegant as girls, they were definitely boys. Packed proudly there in that little bentou box, they looked as if they might start moving, and even the skin showing from under their clothing looked real enough to touch. In fact, I thought I could practically hear them exchanging the words of their forbidden love.

That was some lunch.

We'd had the same ingredients and the same tools, so how in the world was this possible? I could only stare blankly at what Elvia-san had done.

"Man, that was hard work," she said. "But I feel pretty good about how it turned out!" She smiled broadly.

"You... You should."

As for me, I could only manage a vague nod as I looked back at the lunch box sitting in front of me.

It was supposed to be a "magical girl." Madoka, the main character from the show *Rental ☆Madoka*. I'd made her hair the right light-pink color and even gotten the ribbon she always wore in her hair. The big, round eyes were correct, too.

And yet, after looking at Elvia-san's work, my own lunch box looked depressingly underwhelming. A girl? From the wrong angle, it looked more like a monster. I guess that's the difference between real art and a child's scribblings.

I couldn't help feeling depressed. Could anyone but me look at this and recognize it as Madoka? Would they know it was a *kyara-ben*, a so-called "character lunch box"?

".....Sigh..."

Even if I wasn't feeling confident about it, it was too late to redo it now. I started cleaning up the scattered knives and spatulas in the kitchen, heaving a long breath.

I looked out the window, every bump the carriage ran over transmitted to me through my seat. The blue sky seemed to go on forever, and I could see groups of sprites weaving among the clouds. It looked like it was going to be another beautiful, pleasant day.

But...

"Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama are gonna be thrilled," Elvia-san said with a grin from the seat across from me. On her knees she held the lunch she had just made, a *kyara-ben*—a lunch box that used ingredients to recreate a character from an anime or manga. The one I had made was sitting on my own lap.

We were currently riding by bird-drawn carriage to the school where my master, Shinichi-sama, and his bodyguard, Koganuma Minori-sama, were teaching. We were going to deliver the lunches to them. The one I had made was going to Shinichi-sama, while Elvia-san would give hers to Minori-sama. We had created different things, but we'd had the same ingredients, tools, and containers with which to do it...

"That lunch of yours, Elvia-san... It looks amazing," I said honestly.

Elvia-san was an artist, so it only made sense that she would be good at art. But we weren't using drawing supplies like she was used to; we were using kitchen tools like knives and spatulas, along with ingredients that varied in toughness and color. It wasn't really the same process. That only made it all the more impressive that Elvia-san had managed to come up with such a masterpiece on her first try.

"I'm sure Minori-sama will be very happy," I said.

"Y' think so?" Elvia-san responded, laughing shyly and scratching her cheek. Her unabashed cheerfulness was almost blinding to me at that moment.

"Compared to yours, my own bentou is..."

I had never been the most gifted at fine motor skills, so while cooking was well and good, working with tiny ingredients wasn't my strong suit. I'd heard that the professional chefs who served in big noble households could make vegetables look like animals or people, and even build castles and towers and other beautiful structures out of their ingredients... but I had never had the chance to learn those kinds of techniques.

Even so, I figured that since it was just another form of cooking, I might be able to make it work, and that was what had inspired me to try a kyara-ben like Shinichi-sama had told me about.

I've already described the result. With no time to redo it, I'd swallowed my pride and brought the lunch, but after seeing how Elvia-san's came out, I couldn't shake the impression that my own effort was pretty pitiful. I even wondered if I should really be giving such a poor thing to Shinichi-sama.

"I-It'll be fine!" Elvia-san insisted. "Y-Yours will definitely taste better than mine, that's for sure!"

"Appearance and aroma are also part of cooking," I said sadly.

The human senses are remarkably fickle things. Two items can taste exactly the same, but if one of them is ugly and unpresentable and the other is plated beautifully, the latter will be perceived as tasting better.

"Er, okay, but these are character lunches. I mean, I'm doing art all the time, right? It's sort of the same thing."

I understood what Elvia-san was trying to say: artistic sensibility was key to a successful kyara-ben. For someone who could barely draw with a pencil on paper, trying to do art in a strange "medium"—specifically, food—wasn't likely to turn out well.

And we had been using the exact same ingredients. I had actually started doing the character lunch on my own, but when Elvia-san happened to walk by and see me, she said it looked interesting and asked if she could try. And so we ended up making lunches together. She hadn't prepared any of the ingredients, just assembled them.

There might be an issue with the specific combinations, but the basic flavors in both our lunches would be the same.

"I'm sure yours will taste better than mine!" Elvia-san insisted, clenching her fist. Maybe she was just being nice. She hemmed and hawed for a moment, perhaps looking for a good change of subject.

"Say, uh, Myusel—have you always been good at cooking?" she finally asked.

"No, not really... It's just, when I was in the military, they charged me with making the rice, so..."

Military life was not all swinging swords and battling with magic. On longer marches, it became necessary to cook and to do laundry. And in most cases, rather than have the front-line soldiers attend to those tasks, it proved most convenient to have people who specialized in those roles. So, while I had certainly been taught a minimum of sword fighting and magic, the thing I learned the most about in the army was cooking.

“Even the slightest bit of care and time in preparing was enough to make everyone very happy...”

It should go without saying that the goal of food in the military is to make sure the soldiers have enough strength to fight. Therefore, quantity and nutritional value are paramount, with taste often becoming a secondary concern—but even a small amount of extra effort can change the flavor for the better. After a grueling day of training or fighting, to have everyone smile in surprise and ask, “Who made the food today?” made me very happy. Granted, my superiors usually took credit, but still...

I was smiling, but Elvia-san frowned. “I’m amazed you enjoy it so much,” she said. “Kyara-ben are great and all, but when it comes right down to it, I’m not much of a cook.”

“Maybe you’d like it if you tried it,” I said.

How long to cook something was, after all, a matter of experience. It wasn’t quite like a drawing, where you could see it coming together while you were working on it—but that made it all the more satisfying when the finished product had the flavor you were going for.

“I wonder,” Elvia-san said, crossing her arms. “I think maybe it’s just my blood.”

“Your... blood?”

“’Sright,” Elvia-san said with a broad gesture. “The blood—you know, the blood that runs through my veins, given to me by generations of my ancestors! This isn’t the blood of good cooks! My mom doesn’t cook, and neither do Big Sis Jiji or Big Sis Ama!”

“Uh-huh...” I remembered that Elvia-san was one of three siblings.

“I guess my dad was the best cook out of all of us, but was his stuff really, *really* good? I’d have to say... not really.” Elvia-san gazed into the distance. Maybe she was remembering the taste of her father’s cooking.

“I don’t think blood has much to do with it,” I offered. “Although they do say that eating delicious food from a young age gives you a more sensitive palate.”

Of course, maybe it was all relative. If you had to learn all about flavors when you were young in order to be a decent cook, then there was no way I should be able to make any kind of food. I felt like I hadn’t learned what good food really tasted like until I got into the military.

Just as I was thinking that, Elvia-san said, “So Myusel, you grew up eating some really delicious stuff, huh?”

“Oh... Uh, I’m not so sure about that.” I tried to put an ambiguous smile on my face.

“Were your mom and dad really good at cooking?” Now Elvia-san was leaning toward me, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it. That’s why I tried to respond in kind.

“I’m not sure. I guess I don’t really know.”

I watched the scenery go by the window as I answered. The sky was clear and seemed to go on forever. It was blue enough to suck me in and never let me go.

I wondered if those two people, my mother and father, were somewhere under this same sky. I had no idea where they were or what they might be doing.

“Huh? .....Oh.”

It was then that Elvia-san seemed to remember: I’m a half-elf, the offspring of an elf and a human. Come to think of it, her own country of Bahairam at least officially viewed everyone as equal under the king, so differences in the status of different races were ostensibly less pronounced than they were in Eldant. How would a half-breed like me have been treated if I’d been born in Bahairam? Would they still hate and harass me? Or...

“Uh, er, sorry, I—”

“It’s all right. It doesn’t bother me.” I shook my head. Maybe a little harder than I needed to, in the attempt to distance us from this subject. “Again, I don’t think your parents’ cooking ability has anything to do with it. I’m sure if you practiced, Elvia-san, you could learn to make perfectly delicious food.”

“Y— Y’ really think so?”

“You eat a lot, don’t you?”

“Heh... Well...” She scratched her cheek.

Elvia-san was the mansion’s resident “big eater”—what, with a little less tact, we might call a glutton. When she was completely focused on her art, she seemed perfectly happy to go without food, but perhaps as a result, when she did eat, she could easily manage three times what I ate.

“I think people who like to eat are ideal chefs,” I said.

“I wonder.”

“Do you think someone who hated to look at art could become an artist?”

“I guess I see what y’ mean.”

“If you know what people want from a meal, you’ll be able to do more for them.”

“Hey, I get it!”

It seemed I had at least succeeded in dispelling the unpleasant atmosphere for the moment. We talked about some basic flavorings for a few minutes, until the carriage arrived at the school.

After we delivered our character bentou to Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama, Elvia-san and I stayed at the school rather than going back home. We both wanted to study.

Presumptuous as it was, I sometimes played the part of a Ja-panese language teacher, so in order not to embarrass myself in front of the students, I took any chance I could get to read Ja-panese books. For her part, as Shinichi-sama’s resident artist, Elvia-san wanted to study Ja-panese-style “moe art,” and would look at art books and illustration collections every time we came to the school.

Of course, Shinichi-sama had the same or similar things on the bookshelves at home, but because these were for student use, many of them came with pamphlets containing Eldant translations, and sometimes even brief appreciations. Looking through these could give me an idea of alternate translations or ways of thinking about a book. There were so many things to learn from them, and I could also use them to judge the students’ level of comprehension.

But setting all that aside...

“Myusel.”

School was over, and Elvia-san and I were riding home with Minori-sama and Shinichi-sama in the bird-drawn carriage, which we had asked to wait for us. Shinichi-sama sat next to me, while across from us sat Minori-sama and Elvia-san.

“Thanks for the lunch,” Shinichi-sama said. “It was delicious—I mean, I know it always is, but still.”

“Thank you very much...” I felt my heart pounding at his characteristically kind words. Thinking back on how pathetic my own

kyara-ben had looked next to Elvia-san's, though, I felt more apologetic than happy.

"But I'm very sorry... I couldn't make it as beautiful as Elvia-san's..."

"So what? Even where we come from, making kyara-ben takes a lot of skill." Shinichi-sama pulled out the "sumart fone" he always had with him. These devices were capable of instantly making extremely detailed pictures—apparently called "fotografs"—and now it was displaying an all too clear one of our lunches. I felt all the shame of it rushing back.

"Please, Shinichi-sama, it—it's so embarrassing...!" I fussed.

Shinichi, though, shook his head and said, "There's nothing embarrassing about it. I know how hard you must have worked on it. This picture will remind me how you gave me such a wonderful gift."

"Oh... er, but... Thank you very much..."

That made me very happy, but... at the same time, I could tell he was choosing words that wouldn't hurt me. Shinichi-sama was so very, very kind. He was so thoughtful, even toward someone like me.

"Say, Elvia." The sudden turn of the conversation toward Elvia-san came from Minori-sama.

"Yeah?" She cocked her head.

"What *was* the story with that bentou?"

She was referring, of course, to Elvia-san's kyara-ben. I might have expected Minori-sama to be thrilled with that lunch, but she was frowning as if she had eaten something bitter. Elvia-san didn't seem to notice, though; in fact, she looked rather pleased with herself.

"Oh, that. Man, I worked hard to re-create that picture!"

"It was something, that's for sure. I never expected to see the couple from *Innocent Romance* in my lunch! Especially not with that soft glow in their cheeks, like they're really alive—wait, that's not what I'm talking about!" She smacked her own knee audibly. "The meat was tasteless, practically raw; the veggies were chopped but nothing more; and I guess the stewed stuff was okay, but most of the sides hardly tasted like anything! So it looked great, sure, but actually eating it was a huge ordeal!"

It sounded like Minori-sama was saying that things with no flavor at all had gotten mixed up alongside things that tasted more or less normal.

"Huh? B-But I... When I tasted it, it seemed fine..."

Elvia-san shot little worried glances at me. She probably hadn't expected this reaction. She probably wanted me to testify that she really had

made the lunch in good faith.

"Uh... Um," I said, raising my hand. "Minori-sama. May I?"

"Yes?"

"I suspect that the normal-tasting things you mentioned are the things I cooked, and which Elvia-san put into those shapes, whereas the things with no flavor are ingredients Elvia-san simply included wholesale."

"Wholesale? Heck, even for a salad, you usually..."

"I apologize. I should have talked to Elvia-san about it." I looked over at the beast girl as I spoke. "I hear werewolf taste buds are very discriminating."

"Discriminating?"

"They can pick up the flavors of discrete ingredients, if you will. When I cook for Brooke-san, for instance, I often serve things that have barely even been heated, right?"

"Sure, now that you mention it," Minori-sama nodded.

"Although not quite at the level of lizardmen, beast people have a different sense of taste than we do. A careless combination of flavors can actually be quite overwhelming for them."

For example, some kinds of meats and vegetables became less stringent when cooked—but that stringency was also an important part of their flavor profile. Too strong, and it could become distracting, but none at all, and the food seemed lifeless. It was a tricky balance. And what seemed just right to a human or an elf could easily seem overpowering to a beast person.

"But doesn't Elvia usually eat the same stuff as the rest of us?" Shinichi-sama asked, puzzled.

"The ingredients and basic appearance are the same," I answered, "but I don't cook Elvia-san's food as thoroughly, and I use fewer flavorings."

Heat could bring out the special qualities of a food, and also added flavor and even nutrients. But different races—especially ones with such distinct palates—could disagree about the perfect flavor, or the perfect combination.

"So you're saying you make Elvia's special, just for her?"

"It's just a matter of setting some aside before I get to the cooking and seasoning step," I said.

Don't boil it too much, don't overcook it, and don't add too much extra flavor. I could simply set Elvia-san's portion aside early during those stages.

In the army, I had dealt with similar discrepancies in taste, so making those kinds of calls came naturally to me.

"You've been doing that all along? Wow," Shinichi-sama said, his eyes wide. I didn't think it was anything deserving of such praise, though, so I felt a little uncomfortable. I could tell my cheeks were turning red, and I shook my head.

"No, it's... It's just my job..."

"So basically, Elvia made my lunch based on her own taste perceptions," Minori-sama said with a sigh. "At first I thought it was some kind of prank."

"I'm very sorry," I said, "it completely slipped my mind..."

I had been so caught up in making my own bentou presentable that it hadn't even occurred to me to monitor what Elvia-san was doing with her flavors.

"I'm very, very sorry, Minori-sama," Elvia-san said, bowing her head.

"Aw... No, I'm sorry," Minori-sama replied, not sounding very convinced. "I didn't realize... But anyway, I appreciate the thought. The effort you put into that kyara-ben definitely came through."

"D-Did it?"

"All I'm asking is that next time you cook it a little more and add a little more seasoning."

"Sure thing! I'll have Myusel teach me!" Elvia-san looked up at Minori-sama, her tail wagging eagerly.

For better or for worse, Elvia-san's facial expressions were never difficult to read; and the rest of her body likewise tended to make her emotional state clear. She also usually said exactly what she was thinking—honestly, I was a little jealous of that side of her.

I was gazing vacantly at Elvia-san's wagging tail, these thoughts running through my mind, when Minori-sama leaned forward and looked out the little window between us and the driver's bench. "Well, we're here."

The glance out the window was a nonchalant action on Minori-sama's part, but it was actually something she did as Shinichi-sama's bodyguard. She wanted to make sure there was no one suspicious near the mansion before we got out of the carriage. Minori-sama also carried a "fone," and she sometimes used it to check on things, but in the end she wanted to make sure with her own eyes.

“Huh...?” Minori-sama made a sudden sound of surprise. Then she glanced at me from behind her glasses.

I looked back in perplexity.

“Myusel.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any... sisters or anything?”

“Huh...?” Now it was my turn to blink in surprise. “I—I’m not sure what you mean.”

Halfway out of the carriage, Minori-sama was pointing. Shinichi-sama, Elvia-san, and I followed her.

And then we collectively stopped dead.

A woman was standing in front of the mansion. The first thing I noticed about her was her long flaxen hair. The next thing was her ears, which came to points...

“Wait. Are there... *two* Myusels?” Shinichi-sama said, but I couldn’t answer him. At the edges of my vision I could see my three companions glancing back and forth between me and the visitor, comparing us.

And why shouldn’t they? As Shinichi-sama said, the other woman looked very much like me. I could hardly blame Minori-sama for thinking she might be my sister. But...

“Myusel...” I saw the woman walking toward me. I had the uncanny sense that I was being approached by my own reflection in a mirror. “It’s been so long. Do you... know who I am?”

I didn’t say anything. Truthfully, I *didn’t* know.

It had been more than fifteen years since I had been separated from her. By the time I was aware of the world around me, she wasn’t part of it. So it was reasonable for her to ask if I recognized her. I doubted she actually knew my face, either. It was just that we looked so similar, who else could I be?

I was thinking the same way.

“Mother...” I whispered, and even I could hear the catch in my voice.

The atmosphere in the mansion’s parlor was fraught with tension. Or maybe it was as much me as the atmosphere that was tense.

“It’s been... such a long time,” said the woman on the other side of the table, smiling faintly.

She did look almost exactly like me, but unlike me, she was a full-blooded elf.

Falmelle Faugron.

My... mother, apparently.

Elves don’t age—or rather, they spend a very long time looking and feeling approximately the way one does from the late teens to the late twenties. So in addition to familial resemblance, you could say that over sixteen years of growing, I had caught up with my mother.

Truth be told, I had never imagined I looked so much like my mother. Ever since I had been nominally given as a foster child in my infancy, I had never had any sort of contact with my mother or her family. As the disgusting offspring of a union with a human, they pretended I didn't exist.

But... Why now?

"Have you been well?" Falmelle-san asked.

"Yes..." I responded. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to look her in the face; I kept my eyes down as I spoke. Shinichi-sama and the others were standing behind Falmelle-san, watching the conversation develop. I could feel them looking at me. But I really and truly didn't know how to answer, and instead lapsed into silence.

"Here you are."

I was surprised to hear Minori-sama's voice. I looked up to see her placing tea on the table for me and my mother.

"Oh..." I said.

"Thank you," Falmelle-san said.

"Not at all," Minori-sama said, returning her smile.

It would normally be my job to look after a guest that way. The thought was only just occurring to me, but an excess of nerves kept me from speaking.

Falmelle-san—whether or not she was aware of what I was thinking—brought the cup of tea to her lips and took a sip, a great smile spreading across her face.

"It's delicious."

I slowly, silently picked up my own cup and took a hesitant sip.

Come to think of it, I had never tried tea Minori-sama made. Just as my mother said, it was neither too thin nor too rich, but as relaxing as letting out a breath you've been holding too long.

"You two take your time," Minori-sama said with a small bow—then she, Shinichi-sama, and everyone else left the room.

I followed Shinichi-sama with my eyes, anxious. I couldn't help feeling like I was being abandoned. I fidgeted, uncomfortable with the silence that now filled the reception room.

"Come to think of it, I..." I half stood up as I spoke. "I think I have to bring in the laundry..."

"Surely that can wait a few minutes?" Falmelle-san said, frowning.

"W-Well, it's my job..."

“And does it need to be done right this minute?” There was a bit of an edge in her voice. “And you can’t be the only one capable of bringing in the laundry, anyway. Let someone else do it.”

“But, I...”

She was right. Cerise-san was also a maid in this household. Even Brooke-san or Elvia-san could have brought in the wash. But...

“If it absolutely must be done, ask that girl who was just here,” said Falmelle-san. She must have meant Minori-sama.

Feeling unable to resist the command in her tone, I resettled myself on the sofa.

Falmelle-san watched me with a hint of a frown, but after a moment she said, “I’m glad you at least seem to be doing well.” Her face relaxed into a smile. “I know how it must seem, but I was worried about you. I gather you were in the army for a while? It was the right choice. This household seems a little... different. Are they treating you well? That boy earlier, was he the __”

“Faugron-san,” I interrupted. “Why are you here? And why now?”

I hadn’t seen Falmelle-san—my birth mother—for more than fifteen years. We had been separated so long ago that I didn’t even remember my parents’ faces. I didn’t know them. The only hint I had that Falmelle-san was my mother was her immense resemblance to me.

But she had never contacted me in my entire life. So why now, so suddenly...?

There was a moment’s silence before Falmelle-san let out a soft sigh. Then, wiping the smile off her face, she looked at me once more. She seemed to want me to understand that what she was about to say was important. I felt myself tensing involuntarily.

At length, Falmelle-san said, “I’ve come to get you.”

Then she smiled gently once again.

“Huh?” Whatever I had expected her to say, it wasn’t that. I sat there, blinking. “What do you... mean?”

“My father—your grandfather—has died of illness. That makes me free at last.”

I didn’t speak. What could I say? Obviously, I had no memories of my grandfather. So hearing that he had died didn’t really upset me.

“That’s the reason. That’s why I came for you, Myusel. I’m head of the Faugron family now. And I won’t let anyone speak ill of us.” She looked

closely at my face. “All right?”

I still didn’t say anything. My mother wasn’t so different from my grandfather, in that I didn’t remember either of them.

Maybe I should have been happy that my mother had come for me. I knew that, intellectually. But my heart refused to follow my head. My only feeling was that a person I had no connection to was sitting here, saying things that had no bearing on me. And on top of that...

Shinichi-sama...

If I were to go “home” with Falmelle-san, who said she had come to get me, that would mean leaving my position as Shinichi-sama’s maid. Leaving this house. And that...

“Myusel?” Falmelle-san looked at me, puzzled by my silence. But I could only stare at my knees, at a loss for anything to say.

What am I going to do?

I was absolutely lost.

While I sat there in silence, Falmelle-san seemed to think things over for a moment, before she finally smiled and said, “Well, I guess it’s quite sudden.” She gave a small shrug. “You don’t need to hurry, really. Take your time getting used to the idea. I’m sure you’ll have to arrange a successor and such, too.” Apparently in her mind, there was no question. I would be going back with her.

From an outsider’s perspective, I had to admit that it might not seem like such a bad thing. And yet, I found myself sighing as I walked through the hallways of the mansion.

Falmelle-san seemed set on taking me back home with her—she had decided to spend a few days at the mansion, with no indication that she had any intention of returning home by herself. As it happened, there were a few vacant guest rooms in the mansion, so we would settle her in one of them.

And I still really, really didn’t know what to do. The Faugron family was based so far away from the capital that the trip took several days by carriage. The Faugrons were originally a merchant house, so they had established themselves near the country’s border, the easier to connect with other nations.

All of which meant that if I did go back to Falmelle-san's house, it would take a great deal of time if I ever wanted to come back and visit this mansion.

To go. To go home.

I only knew the Faugron house by name; I just didn't feel like "going home" was the right way to describe what I would be doing.

That's what I was thinking about when I heard someone call my name.

"Myusel, whatcha doing?"

I came to a stop. I looked back, and there was Minori-sama.

"Don't you need to get back? I mean, with your mother here and all."

"Oh, no, I..."

I couldn't bring myself to tell her I was running away from my "mother"—so I just trailed off.

"There's... work to do around the house and everything," I finally managed. I held up the folded sheets I was carrying to underline my point. One of my jobs was to change everyone's sheets each day.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Minori-sama said, taking the bedding from me.

"Huh? Oh..."

"Seriously, don't worry about your work. What else do you need to do?"

"Huh? Well, the laundry, and getting ready for dinner..."

"I'll ask Elvia and Cerise to get the laundry. The three of us will handle dinner together."

"B-But—"

"Your mom came all the way here. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about." Minori-sama was smiling.

Ahh... Minori-sama thought she was helping me. But as grateful as I was for her kindness...

"Okay, see you later." Before I could stop her, Minori-sama left.

I stood there in the hallway with nothing to do. Just stood there.

Normally, Minori-sama was too busy as Shinichi-sama's bodyguard to help out with housework—but she was a good person at heart, so when the need arose she marshaled Elvia-san and Cerise-san, and even pitched in herself. I was sure the cooking and cleaning really would get done. I heard Minori-sama had handled chores back when I was recuperating in the

imperial hospital at the castle. Now she had Cerise-san, too, so I didn't think she would want for helping hands. All of which meant...

"What's up?"

"Huh?! Oh—" I turned at the sudden voice and found Shinichi-sama looking at me curiously.

"Uh, Shinichi-sama!" Without quite meaning to, I ran over to him. "How about some tea? Is there any work you need done?"

"Huh? What? What's gotten into you...?"

"Anything! I'll do anything!"

"Uh..." Shinichi-sama was looking at me, very surprised.

I could see why he might be a little startled, what with his maid suddenly asking him if there was any work to be done. But I really was desperate for even the smallest thing to occupy me. I wanted any excuse not to go back in that room with Falmelle-san—any proof at all that this household needed me.

"Uh... Okay," Shinichi-sama said after a moment's thought. "Could you make me some tea?"

"Yes! I'll bring it to your room right away."

I hurried off to the kitchen, feeling like his response had saved me.

I wheeled the cart with its tea supplies to Shinichi-sama's room. I made it to my destination without seeing anyone on the way. I had been distinctly worried that I might run into someone who would tell me that they would take care of the tea, so I should go be with my mother.

"Shinichi-sama," I said, knocking on the door.

"Come in," he said.

"Thank you." I entered the room and put a saucer and cup of tea on the desk where Shinichi-sama was working.

"Thanks." He looked up and smiled at me.

I thought I was just looking at him normally, but he said, "Uh, is something the matter?"

"What?"

"It's... kind of hard to drink when you're staring at me so intently." There was a wry smile on his face.

I panicked a little. "S—Sorry about that!"

Oops: Shinichi-sama was working. His “lap-top” was open on his desk. The proper thing for a servant to do after having served the tea would be to withdraw so as not to interfere with his work. Maybe, without realizing it, I had been standing around in hopes Shinichi-sama might ask me to do some other chore. While I was working, I could avoid thinking.

“Hey, Myusel...”

When Shinichi-sama spoke to me, I realized I had been staring at the ground. “Y-Yes?! What do you need? If there’s anything at all you want done, just—”

“No, this isn’t about a chore or whatever,” Shinichi-sama said, still smiling. “You and your mom look just like each other, huh.”

“Wha? Oh... Yes.”

“I thought maybe she was your twin sister. She’s... I mean, she’s the one who gave birth to you, right? But she looks almost the same age as you.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I was given up for adoption immediately after I was born, so...”

“Oh...” Shinichi-sama put a hand to his mouth as if just making the connection. “Uh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s all right.” I shook my head, a bit of a smile playing across my face. “Elves... They don’t age the same way as humans.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s often said that elves don’t age, but really what happens is, once the body and mind are fully formed, the rate of change just becomes much slower.”

“Oh, huh! So the prime of their life is a lot longer. I’ve heard humans reach their physical peak from their twenties to their early thirties... It’s like that just goes on, huh? So, will that happen to you, Myusel?”

“No. I’m only half elf.” I shook my head. “I expect that after I reach about twenty years old, I won’t change as quickly as a full-blooded human. I don’t know exactly how it will work, myself. There aren’t that many half-elves around to tell me...”

In fact, many aborted half-elf children when they realized they were carrying such despised offspring, or “dealt” with them immediately upon birth. In that sense, perhaps one could say I was lucky.

“There might even come a time when I look older than Falmelle-san.”

Shinichi-sama was quiet for a moment. He blinked, looking me in the face as if for the first time. “Hmm. So...” He took a sip of tea. “Your mom is an elf.”

“Yes.”

“That means your dad must be...”

“That’s right. The human.”

“Huh. I see...”

He brought the cup to his lips again. The small sips, one after another, made me feel like there was something he wanted to say, something he felt he had to say, but which he couldn’t bring himself to express, and he was swallowing it with the tea.

For a while, Shinichi-sama didn’t speak. He took a sip, put the cup down—then picked it up again as if he had remembered something, and took another sip. Several times he did this.

But no matter how slowly one drinks a cup of tea, eventually it goes empty.

I picked up the teapot. “Would you like—”

“No, it’s okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Listen, Myusel.”

“Yes?”

“I... Let me say first, if you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to, okay?” He was trying to be considerate of me. Then he started in on his question. “Myusel, your mom and dad...” He looked away from me, as if concerned. Maybe he was looking for just the right words. But I could more or less guess what he wanted to ask.

“Falmelle Faugron is the daughter of a merchant house,” I said. “I was given up for adoption before I had any memory of her, so I don’t know much more than that, but that’s what I was told.”

“So your grandpa was a merchant?”

“Yes. It seems the family did relatively well for itself. Falmelle-san is a prophet, so ever since she herself was small, her powers have helped the family succeed in their business ventures.”

“A prophet... You mean like, someone who tells the future?”

“Yes. There are some people with powers like that.”

“Wow...”

“It’s not precisely a well-defined magic, so I gather there are some substantial limitations to it, but still.”

Elves had a natural aptitude for magic. If a human and an elf used the same spell, the elf's magic would be more accurate, able to be used more times, and would have a variety of other advantages. However, it was humans who systematized magic and organized it into a skill that could be learned. Elf magic is more the natural expression of magical power, with each individual having different magicks based on their life experiences.

Thus, some spells appeared naturally among the elves, even when no one had gone out of their way to learn them. They were often, I had heard, unusual abilities not available to other people. Falmelle-san's gift of prophecy was a classic example.

My understanding was that she was only able to offer the most enigmatic descriptions, but even so, her ability was highly valued in the work of the Faugron family.

"Not many elves have succeeded at business, but the Faugron household became an exception. They even became frequent visitors at the houses of human nobles and important human merchants. And that's how Falmelle-san... my mother... met my father."

"So that's the story..."

"But... I guess my father wasn't a very good person..."

I didn't even know his name. The people who adopted me certainly hadn't told me—but even Falmelle-san herself hadn't mentioned it.

"Apparently my father leaned heavily on my mother for money, such that it even began to affect the family business."

"He really took that much?" Shinichi-sama blinked in surprise. "He was a bit of a no-goodnik, huh..."

"'No-goodnik'?"

"Oh, uh, it means a guy who's not worth much."

"I see. Maybe that describes him." I sighed and nodded.

The care with which his identity had been concealed might mean he was someone of such high status that there would be a general outcry if it was discovered he had been with an elf woman. Or otherwise, it meant there was something shameful about the man himself.

I couldn't help but suspect that with my father, it was the latter.

"At the time, it was my grandfather—Falmelle-san's father—who was head of the family, and he was immensely angry. He forced the two of them to separate. Because Falmelle-san's prophecies were so crucial to his business, he would never kick her out, but instead he imprisoned her."

“Imprisoned?”

“He kept her in the house, and hardly ever let her go outside.”

“Ahh...” Shinichi-sama scratched his cheek; it almost looked like he was smiling. “It’s one thing to shut yourself up in your house. But to have it forced on you... That must be terrible.”

“I think so, too,” I said, nodding.

In fact, I had been kept in near imprisonment in my own adoptive home on the grounds that it “wouldn’t look good” for me to be seen. Unable to stand it, I had run away from that house and ended up living like an orphan on the streets. But even then, I simply couldn’t imagine going back.

“After they found out Falmelle-san was with child, they debated whether or not to end the pregnancy. Ultimately, they thought maybe her child might have prophetic powers like its mother, so they decided to wait and see... But even as a baby, I showed no sign of such gifts.”

I understood that Falmelle-san had considerably more magical ability even than most elves, but as for me, my magic powers were closer to those of a human, and it was decided that I was unlikely to develop prophecy or any other unique gifts.

“And so I was given up.”

“Jeez, that’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard!” There was an uncharacteristic stiffness in Shinichi-sama’s expression. “Didn’t they care at all about their grandchild?”

“Shinichi-sama...”

“Is the whole family obsessed with what will or won’t help them in their business?” He seemed genuinely agitated.

It surprised me. These were all things that were over and done with long ago. They didn’t have anything to do with him. And yet he seemed so involved...

“They just didn’t have any choice,” I said.

“Didn’t have any choice?”

“It’s bad enough for an elf to be with a human. If people knew that a child had come of it... It would be more than bad for business. The whole Faugron family might collapse. Many humans of the Holy Eldant Empire aren’t very open to the idea of elves trying to expand their business...”

“Oh...” Shinichi-sama’s eyes widened with a flash of understanding. “So you could even use *that* as an excuse...”

“An excuse? Use what?” I looked at him, not understanding.

“I don’t know your grandpa, Myusel, and I guess it’s possible he was just a really terrible guy.” Shinichi-sama crossed his arms as he spoke. “But is it possible he used the excuse ‘she might prove useful’ to prevent his grandchild from being killed before she was born?”

I caught my breath, amazed. The thought had never so much as occurred to me. But now that Shinichi-sama said it, I saw that of course, it was a possibility. Although now that Falmelle-san’s father, my grandfather, was dead, there was no way to be sure...

“If his business was really all that big, then I’m sure he had lots of staff members, people whose livelihoods and families depended on him. In that case, maybe sending you away was the least awful thing he could do.”

“Maybe...”

Naturally, everything Shinichi-sama was saying was speculative. It was always possible that none of it was true, that my grandfather had simply foisted an inconvenient child on someone else. That was what I had always believed, and I really had no way of knowing what the truth was. But still...

“I mean, maybe it’s just me,” Shinichi-sama said with an uneasy grin. “I have a bad habit of looking for the best in people. Now your grandpa’s gone, right? And we can’t turn back time. Maybe it would make your life just a little happier to believe something better about him instead of something worse.”

I didn’t speak, but I could feel heat rushing to my head. *Ahh, sweet Shinichi-sama, he’s so—*

“Shinichi-sama. I—I don’t resent the fact that I was given up for adoption.”

“No?”

“It’s part of what led me to working here at this mansion.”

Part of what led me to serving at your side. My dear Shinichi-sama.

In my mind, the happiness I felt now more than made up for whatever I had suffered arriving at it.

“Myusel...” Shinichi-sama blinked in surprise. Finally he said, “I see. I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, smiling.

But then Shinichi-sama, also smiling, added, “Plus, now you get to live with your mom, huh?”

“Wha...?” I felt my expression freeze.

“Your mother. She must have come for you, right?” He was still smiling.

It was a happy thing that Falmelle-san had come to bring me home. It should be happy. I knew in my mind that I should be overjoyed. Why shouldn’t Shinichi-sama smile for me?

But at that moment, I couldn’t for the life of me feel happy.

If this had all happened before I had started working at this mansion.

Before I had started serving Shinichi-sama.

Then, maybe I could have been happy, like I was supposed to be.

“Yes... Yes, she did...”

“That’s great.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt like he was talking me into a need to be happy, and it left me deeply anxious.

Living with Falmelle-san would mean leaving this house. It would mean I couldn’t live with Minori-sama and Brooke-san and Cerise-san and Elvia-san, and above all, with Shinichi-sama.

True, I might still be able to see them again, sometime. But...

“But if you go with her...” Now Shinichi-sama turned to his desk, as if deliberately putting his back to me. I could see him playing with the empty teacup. “I guess we’ll have to ask Petralka to hire a new maid for us, huh?”

I still didn’t speak. Was he... saying they didn’t need me anymore?

I felt a sharp pain deep in my chest. I knew well enough that there was nothing about me that made me irreplaceable. I wasn’t a warrior like Minori-sama or Brooke-san. I couldn’t do art like Elvia-san. What did I do? Cook and make tea and do laundry—but as the kyara-ben and the cup of tea in the parlor proved, none of this was anything Minori-sama, Elvia-san or Cerise-san couldn’t handle.

Maybe they would even be able to hire a better maid than me.

In short, there was no reason at all that I absolutely had to be here. No reason I had to be the one serving Shinichi-sama.

I started to feel dizzy as I absorbed the fact. But I couldn’t say anything to Shinichi-sama about it; I just stood there staring at his back.

The next day, I was to appear at the castle with Shinichi-sama. In other words, I was to attend an audience with Petralka an Eldant III, the empress.

There were a number of audience rooms at Eldant Castle, of which we were shown into the very smallest. Even so, it was bigger than any room in our mansion, and it had a unique atmosphere that always made me a little uneasy. Normally, someone like me would never get anywhere near the empress.

".....And that's the story."

Altogether, four of us were shown into the audience chamber. Shinichi-sama, Minori-sama, myself—and Falmelle-san. Since the subject of a replacement maid for me was expected to come up at this audience, I had been brought along. And Falmelle-san, insisting she wanted to pay her respects to the empress, attached herself as well.

Just a visit with the empress would raise her stature as a merchant in the Holy Eldant Empire, so she didn't want to miss this opportunity—or so I suspected. Falmelle-san may have spent her life imprisoned, but she had certainly absorbed the commercial know-how of the Faugron family.

Shinichi-sama explained the broad contours of the situation before concluding, "So we're going to need a new maid... Is that all right?"

"Will you indeed," the empress mused from her throne. Her Majesty held the imposing title of Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, but in fact she was impossibly cute. She had luxurious, beautiful silver hair and round eyes as green as emeralds; she looked like the delicate work of a master doll maker. Her Majesty, however, seemed somewhat uncomfortable with the fact that this made her look a bit young—she seemed to be concerned that it would undermine her authority—and she would not be very pleased to hear anyone actually pronounce her "cute."

"So you are Myusel's mother."

Her Majesty looked past Shinichi-sama to where Falmelle-san and I were standing behind him. I felt myself straighten up, but Falmelle-san somehow seemed even calmer under the imperial gaze.

"The resemblance is apparent. We might have taken you for sisters." The empress sounded intrigued.

Falmelle-san offered an elegant bow in return. "My father told me she looked exactly as I did when I was an infant. Thus some expectation attended her, but sadly it seems my daughter has not inherited any of my powers."

"Powers, you say?" Her Majesty leaned forward, her interest apparently piqued by Falmelle-san's pregnant hint.

“Oh, nothing very remarkable. Sometimes it is called ‘The Foreseeing Eye.’ It’s terribly vague, never showing me any details—but once in a while, images of the future are revealed to my sight.”

“My goodness...” The empress’s eyes widened. “The power of prophecy? We have heard tell of it, but...”

“Apparently it’s helped business go very well for her family,” Shinichi-sama added.

“We do have some magic-users who tell fortunes here at the castle,” Her Majesty reflected. “But besides being most imprecise, these fortune-tellers claim that to see the future is to change the future, or some such thing. If your power is indeed what you say, it could be of great use to our nation in everything from governance to war. We could wish you were one of our retainers.”

“It is a tremendous honor,” Falmelle-san said with another bow—but then she shook her head. “As it happens... I cannot simply peer into the future any time I please. When and what I see is beyond my control. But even the faintest glimpses can often be useful in commerce.”

“Commerce...” Her Majesty glanced at Shinichi-sama before saying, “That’s right—we haven’t asked your name. What are you called?”

“Your Majesty. My name is Falmelle Faugron.”

“Hm?” The empress raised an eyebrow. She thought for a moment before exclaiming, “You mean of the Faugron house?!”

“The very same.”

“You know them?” Shinichi-sama asked in surprise.

“We know the name. Permission to trade for concerns above a specific size is issued in our name, and we are sure the name Faugron was among those we approved. We remembered it because it’s so unusual for elves to become such successful merchants. The house even came up when considering companies that could assist in the export of otaku goods.”

“Huh!” Shinichi-sama looked back at me and Falmelle-san, impressed.

“But what a very strange coincidence. Who would have guessed that Myusel was a daughter of the Faugron house...”

The fact was, I myself still didn’t know that much about the household; all I really knew was what Falmelle-san had told me.

“In any event, it is certainly well that mother and daughter should live together,” Her Majesty said earnestly. That was when I remembered—the empress had lost her own parents when she was young.

“We are convinced,” she went on. “Shinichi, you may entrust us with finding you a new maid.”

“Thanks, Petralka,” Shinichi-sama said with a smile.

Minori-sama smiled, too, as did Her Majesty—and Falmelle-san. No one expressed any objection to getting a new maid.

Nobody tried to stop this.

I tried to push aside the pain that caused me as I stood staring at the ground.

However great and powerful the empress might be, even she couldn’t get a new maid the very same day she was asked to do so. Thus, until someone new could be found, I would continue to work at the mansion as I had before. Minori-sama, Cerise-san, and Elvia-san all wanted to help out, but the fact was that when I was with Falmelle-san, I could never quite calm down.

It wasn’t that I hated her or something. I just...

“Sigh...” I found myself letting out a long breath as I did the wash. It was perfect laundry weather, not a cloud in the clear, blue sky. But my heart was a leaden grey. Even my body felt unusually heavy.

I hadn’t slept a wink since the audience the other day. Maybe that accounted for why I had to drag myself around. Every time I tried to sleep, my mind filled up with the image of this house without me in it. Someone, some stranger, standing beside Shinichi-sama as he smiled and drank his tea. Standing there like it was the most natural thing in the world... Just thinking about it was enough to put me into a depression.

And so, in order to avoid thinking as much as I could, I spent sleepless nights cleaning the house. When I was working, when my body was moving, was the one time I could keep the awful thoughts at bay.

“Sigh...”

I sighed for the umpteenth time as I fished the clothes out of the laundry hamper and dunked them in a bucket of water. In my head, I frequently went over the steps. *Separate the clothes into two or three loads and wash them...*

“Oh...”

I stopped in the middle of putting the clothes in the bucket.

I was holding one of Shinichi-sama's shirts.

When the new maid came, she would wash Shinichi-sama's shirts instead. It could be as soon as tomorrow. And then this would be the last time I ever did Shinichi-sama's laundry...

The thought made my chest ache. I hugged the familiar shirt tightly. Shinichi-sama's smell clung faintly to it.

Gripped by an intense sadness, I buried my face in the shirt—

"Myusel."

I jumped, the unexpected sound of Falmelle-san's voice bringing me back to my senses. I turned around to see her walking toward me, and quickly dropped Shinichi-sama's shirt in the bucket of water.

How long had Falmelle-san been there? Had she noticed me hugging Shinichi-sama's laundry?

She stopped right in front of me, then looked at the bucket. I saw her eyes narrow slightly. Shinichi-sama's shirt was still floating at the top of it, absorbing water.

Her expression flickered as if she wanted to say something. "Myusel, you..."

Her eyes on me burned; I turned my face away as if hoping to flee. There I had been, hugging Shinichi-sama's shirt, sniffing it. What a base and unrefined daughter I was. I squeezed my eyes shut, shame tinting my face red, and braced myself for the words I was sure were coming.

But I didn't hear them. Only silence. No matter how long I waited, Falmelle-san didn't say anything.

Finally, I slowly opened my eyes and looked up.

Falmelle-san was looking down at me with an expression that was difficult to describe. She wasn't angry. Nor frustrated or annoyed. Nor sad. She wasn't even happy. And yet it could have been any of those things.

At length she murmured only, "Well, never mind." Then she turned and walked away from me.

What was it she had wanted...?

I watched her go before I finally collected myself enough to finish the laundry.

If only they never find another maid...

The thought came to me sometimes when I was especially depressed. But of course, it was in vain—eventually we received word that someone new had been found. They would arrive at the mansion within the next few days.

It would take the newcomer some time to get accustomed to how things were done at our house, so Minori-sama, Elvia-san, Cerise-san, and even Brooke-san would take over some of the work I had been doing until the new maid was settled in.

"Uh... About meals," I said, looking around at Minori-sama and the others, who had joined me in the kitchen. "Elvia-san generally prefers less intense flavors and about one-third the seasonings I use in Shinichi-sama's food. How much to cook it is really a matter of feel. If you're going to grill something, a light scorching will do. If you're boiling something, make sure to take it off the heat before the flavor gets too stringent. For Brooke-san and Cerise-san, I mostly try to leave the ingredients alone as much as possible—but when it comes to fruits in particular, it has to be something ripe, just about to spoil. Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama get roughly the same things, but be careful when you're serving mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?" Minori-sama repeated.

"Yes," I said, nodding. "Shinichi-sama doesn't really like mushrooms."

"Izzat right?" Elvia-san said. "I didn't know that."

"He's never told me so specifically, but he always leaves his mushroom dishes until the very end. And then it takes him a moment or two before he starts eating them. He doesn't chew them very thoroughly, which I think is bad for his digestion. So please try to avoid serving mushrooms as a main course, or chop them finely and include them in something else."

Minori-sama and Elvia-san looked at each other dubiously. Had I said something wrong...?

Even while part of me wondered about it, I moved on to the next thing. "Now, about the laundry."

"Right," Cerise-san nodded. It wouldn't do to have someone with such a different sense of taste in the kitchen, so in addition to her usual chores, I asked her to take over the washing.

"Shinichi-sama likes the color green. He'll always wear his favorite clothes as long as they're washed, so if you see anything green in the laundry, please start with that. And then... Oh, yes. About the cleaning."

I was always responsible for cleaning Shinichi-sama's room, so there were some pointers I had to give them about that. "When it comes to Shinichi-sama's room, be sure to check it thoroughly, especially around the wastebasket. Shinichi-sama has an unfortunate habit of not getting up to throw trash away. If he happens to reach the wastebasket with a toss from his chair, well and good, but if he misses, trash can end up piled by the wall. It can also hide in the shadows of the bookshelves and other hard-to-see places, so be careful..."

And on and on.

Was there anything else I needed to tell them? I looked down, counting on my fingers, numbering off the important details. That was when I felt several gazes upon me.

Minori-sama. Elvia-san. Cerise-san. Brooke-san. All of them were watching me intently.

I could never tell from their faces what Cerise-san and Brooke-san were thinking, but Minori-sama's and Elvia-san's expressions, I could read.

Were they... exasperated? But why?

"Um... Is something the matter?"

"Myusel," Elvia-san started. "You've talked about nothin' but Shinichi-sama this entire time."

"Wha...?"

It took me a second to process what she meant. I had just been explaining the jobs I did in this mansion.

I paused, reviewing in my mind what I had talked about. Shinichi-sama's food. Shinichi-sama's clothes. Shinichi-sama's room. Shinichi-sama's—

"O-Oh... W-Well, I..." I felt my cheeks growing hot. "I didn't mean to..."

But Shinichi-sama was the master of this house, so why wouldn't I have a great deal to say about him? It was crucial to know how to make one's master happiest...

The words started to run together in my head. The more I thought about them, the more they felt like an excuse. I found myself unable to speak. I looked down at where my hands rested on my knees, wishing that no one could see me looking like this.

For a while, nobody spoke, an unnatural silence settling over the kitchen.

Finally, Minori-sama broke the quiet. “Anyway, I’ll handle the food. I’m probably the one with the best chance of making something Shinichi-kun will like. I’m not exactly a great cook, but I can manage the basics.”

She sounded cheerful—maybe it was just a nasty suspicion in me that made it sound forced.

I looked up to see Cerise-san nodding. “Let Brooke and me do the cleaning.” She looked at her husband, who looked back and nodded.

Lizardman faces are different in shape and even texture from our own, sometimes rendering them almost impossible to understand, but there was also a small number of gestures that were perfectly comprehensible. The fact that Brooke-san and Cerise-san worked well together was evident from how few words they had to speak.

To me, at that moment, the two of them looked like impossibly bright lights...

“And I’ve got th’ laundry!” Elvia-san declared, raising her right hand enthusiastically. She rose halfway out of her seat, her tail wagging happily. “I’ll do Shinichi-sama’s green stuff first, just like you said! I get to sniff the clothes while I’m doing the wash, right?”

“There’s all *kinds* of things wrong with that,” Minori-sama said with a bit of a frown.

“Er, I—I was just jokin’!” Elvia-san insisted, but I found I couldn’t laugh.

“It sure didn’t sound like a joke the way you said it.”

“What? Minori-sama, you’re the worst!” Elvia-san put up her hands defensively.

They all seemed to be having such a nice time together. It looked like fun. If nothing else, it seemed like none of them felt they would be missing anything when I left the mansion.

And that, too, made me terribly sad.

Nobody said “Don’t go.”

Of course, I was painfully aware that they were all pleased that I would finally be able to live with my mother, whom I hadn’t seen in so long. And I *was* happy that Falmelle-san had been thoughtful enough to come get me.

But... even so... couldn’t one of them have at least tried to stop me? Maybe in some corner of my heart, I had been hoping they would.

My vision got a little blurry. *No, don’t cry.* I knew I shouldn’t, couldn’t, but it was out of my control.

“Myusel? What’s wrong?” Minori-sama asked in surprise. Maybe she had noticed.

“Nothing...” I said, quickly using my sleeve to wipe away the tears that threatened to spill over. Somehow I managed to force a smile onto my face. It was a near thing, but it seemed to work.

“Don’t worry so much, Myusel, it’s gonna be fine!” Elvia-san said, leaning across the table. “Even I can handle some laundry! I’m tellin’ you, it’ll be okay!”

“Yes,” I said, still smiling that empty smile. “I’m sure it will.” All I could do was nod along.

I still had hardly slept by the time the day came for me to leave the house.

The new maid, I was told, would be coming the next day, a sort of changing of the guard.

I never had much in the way of personal belongings, so all my luggage, including my changes of clothing, fit in a somewhat large bag. The battle dress I had received from Her Majesty when I went to Bahairam I had decided to launder and respectfully return. I had needed it because I was serving at Shinichi-sama’s side, to protect him. Now that I was leaving him, I wouldn’t need it anymore.

The last thing I packed into my bag was the scrap on which Shinichi-sama had written the “fifty sounds” for me. Once I had packed it away, I let out a breath. I had changed into a one-piece dress for traveling; my maid uniform was folded neatly on the bed.

The maid uniform I had been given when I first arrived at this house. I would never wear it again.

I stood and stared at the outfit I had become so accustomed to wearing...

“Myusel, aren’t you ready yet?” Falmelle-san called from the hallway.

I shuddered. Falmelle-san, who of course couldn’t see me, continued to exhort me to hurry up.

“We’re going, come on.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” I answered to buy myself some time. I could hear how weak and thin my voice sounded.

I stood a moment longer in silence, but just standing there wouldn't change anything.

I shifted, just about to leave... But then I took one last look.

Knowing this would be the last time, I reached out, touched the uniform lying on the bed.

I had almost forgotten how impossibly happy Shinichi-sama had been the first time he saw me wearing this...

I couldn't take my hand away. The thought froze my fingers to the uniform with an immense longing, and I couldn't let go.

"Myusel!"

Falmelle-san's voice came again from outside.

The bird-drawn carriage was already waiting for us. It wasn't the kind we normally used to get to school or the castle. The carriage itself was larger, so riders could be comfortable over journeys of several days, and the wheels were bigger too, since we would be traveling over rougher ground.

And there was Falmelle-san, standing beside the carriage.

Shinichi-sama, Minori-sama, Elvia-san, Brooke-san, and Cerise-san were all there too, almost surrounding her. They had all come to see me and my mother off.

Silently, I came through the front door and headed over to them.

"Oh, Myu...sel?"

Shinichi-sama was the first one to notice me, but as he turned, his eyes widened with surprise. One by one, the others turned, too. Each of them looked startled.

"Myusel." This time it was Falmelle-san's turn to speak, her voice laced with annoyance. "Are you *still* wearing that?"

I stood in front of the house, in front of them all—not in my dress, but in my maid uniform, the one I wore for working in this house. It felt far more familiar and comfortable on me than the dress.

"Hurry up and change," my mother said. "Everyone's waiting here for you, you can't—"

"Falmelle-san," I said.

Briefly, I looked down at the ground. I licked lips that had gone dry with nervousness. I took a deep breath, trying desperately to calm a heart

pounding so loud I could hear it. And then I clenched my fists, scolding myself for being too timid, and looked up.

“I...”

I looked straight at Falmelle-san—at my mother. To my surprise, her expression was reserved and quiet. She didn’t look shocked, or angry. If anything, it was an expression of calm resignation.

“I... don’t want to go...!” My voice shook as I squeezed the words out. The words I had been unable to speak until this very moment.

The instant I said them, the tears poured forth, like a dam had broken. I couldn’t stop the sobs from grabbing my throat. I didn’t want to cry, but I couldn’t stop the gasping and weeping.

“Myusel...” I could see Shinichi-sama and the others, all looking troubled by this sudden spate of tears.

There’s no doubt I was upsetting things by saying this so suddenly. They had already settled on a new maid, after all, and we had even told Her Majesty that I was leaving.

But I couldn’t hide it any longer, from them or from myself. I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay with them... With Shinichi-sama.

And so...

“I...”

I opened my mouth almost involuntarily, not sure myself what I wanted to say. Somehow, though, I was desperate to communicate to them how much I wanted to stay.

My emotions got the better of me, and I could hardly form words. I just stood there with my mouth working open and shut, groaning.

It was at that moment that my vision... tilted.

How strange. The world wasn’t normally so sideways.

No... It wasn’t the world that had moved.

“Oh.....”

I found my sight going dark.

I heard Shinichi-sama shout, “Myusel!”

It was the last thing that reached my ears before I lost consciousness.

The first thing I saw when I came to was a white ceiling. It was the familiar ceiling of my own room.

I was in my own bed—a fact it took me a few minutes to assimilate. I was light-headed and my eyelids felt heavy. Just keeping my eyes open was a struggle; they kept trying to drift shut again.

What had happened to me? I couldn't quite think straight; it felt like my brain was numb. My body was heavy, like it was trapped in mud. I could hardly move a single finger.

Maybe it was because I hadn't slept for so long.

I fought to sit up, but I felt vague and diffident, as if I were floating in water—as if my heart might melt and flow away despite my attempts to hold onto it.

As I wrestled with these sensations, I heard a familiar voice. Shinichi-sama's voice.

"Um... Are you sure she can't stay here?"

"Why would she?" The reply came from Falmelle-san.

Both of them sounded quite close, probably in the same room with me. And yet with my benumbed senses, the conversation itself seemed distant, unreal. I was just listening passively.

"Well..."

"I'm her mother, and I've decided to take her home. What are you saying, that you won't *let* me?"

"No, ma'am... It's just, Myusel said she didn't want to go..."

"A child's logic." Falmelle-san gave a bit of a sigh. "But it has nothing to do with you anyway. Am I wrong?"

"Nothing to do with me—?"

"Or do you also suppose it would be best for Myusel not to go with me? Do you suggest that a parent who has once given up her child has no right to reclaim her?"

"No—"

"Then what *is* your reason for telling me not to take my daughter home?"

Shinichi-sama didn't answer. I could all but feel him flinching under Falmelle-san's withering tone.

“Or,” said my mother, “do you speak without any reason at all?”

“No, I don’t,” Shinichi-sama said. “I mean, I agree that being with your mother is better for sure... But...”

He stopped talking. Silence pervaded the room. Falmelle-san didn’t try to rush an answer from him, but waited without a word.

Finally, Shinichi-sama concluded, “I’m... the same.”

“The same?”

“I don’t want Myusel to go, either. I want her to be here.”

Ahh!

Of course, it would be Shinichi-sama who was kind enough to speak those words. If I hadn’t been feeling so groggy, I would have burst into tears again right then and there.

Falmelle-san, however, heaved a sigh. “Oh, for...”

Her sigh, though, wasn’t one of annoyance or even surrender. Was it just my imagination, or did she sound secretly pleased?

“I guess that girl *is* my daughter,” Falmelle-san murmured. From her voice, I guessed—just guessed—that there was a small smile on her face.

“What do you mean?” Shinichi-sama asked.

“Hmm? What indeed?” Falmelle-san replied, dodging the question.

I think their conversation continued after that, but my mind had finally grown too clouded to continue picking out individual words.

Shinichi-sama...

I slipped back into the depths of sleep.

When at last I opened my sleep-deprived eyes once more, it was all over. Shinichi-sama, I gathered, had reported to Her Majesty that I was to stay at the mansion. Even Minori-sama, who was normally silent during royal audiences, had told Her Majesty on behalf of everyone in the household that it would be better if I stayed.

Finally, there was the matter of Falmelle-san.

“If you hate me enough to burst into tears about it, I guess I really have no choice but to leave you be.” She shrugged.

“It’s... It’s not that I hate you...”

I really didn’t hate Falmelle-san. I just—

“Thank you for your hospitality.” To the bitter end, Falmelle-san didn’t really listen to me—she bowed to Shinichi-sama and the others instead. “Please look after Myusel for me.”

She said she had to be getting back to oversee the Faugron business. Apparently, it had been all she could do to find ten consecutive days to spend in the capital. And with that, we found ourselves standing outside the house, seeing her off.

“Hardly,” Shinichi-sama said. “She’s the one who takes care of us...”

“Oh, that’s just her job,” Falmelle-san said pointedly. For someone who believed her daughter hated her, she looked awfully cheerful. Then she turned to me. “Myusel.”

“Oh... Um...” I took a step forward. “I’m sorry...”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to go home with her, or that I didn’t want to be with her. I understood how awful I must look, chasing out my own mother when she had come specifically to get me. I knew a few words of apology wouldn’t be enough. But still...

“I have to admit,” Falmelle-san said easily, “I thought you might say you wanted to stay here.”

“Wha...?”

Then she leaned in and whispered, “It’s rough. You’d better brace yourself.”

“Huh? Wha?”

“Consider it a word of warning—not from your mother, but from someone who’s been there.” She sounded almost... mischievous. “There was a time when I believed that if I could just be with the person I loved, just be by his side, I didn’t need anything else. That as long as I had those feelings, I could do anything. There was a time.”

And then she drew back again.

“Um... Oh...”

“Well, I’ll be seeing you, Myusel. If I can find some free time, I’ll come back for a visit. Until then, take care.” She smiled brightly.

And as for me...

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.” I was finally able to say it with earnestness and conviction: “Mother.”

Falmelle-san—no, my mother—blinked in surprise for a moment. But then the happy smile came back over her face. She turned and climbed into the carriage.

We were in the dining area, like always. In the same seats as always.

Shinichi-sama was eating breakfast. A single bentou box sat on the table.

There was no school today. We would be eating at home, so a packed lunch really wasn't called for, but Shinichi-sama had specially asked me to prepare this for him.

".....Mm."

Shinichi-sama used his Ja-panese eating utensils, called chop-sticks, to grab one of the side dishes. I stood beside him, watching.

The lunch was, again, a kyara-ben. Compared to something Elvia-san might make, the artistic quality undoubtedly left something to be desired. But Shinichi-sama gamely worked his way through the lunch, using his chop-sticks to take it apart one mouthful at a time.

He would chew slowly, then take a drink.

Finally he turned back to me and said, "Yeah, this is delicious."

His warm smile filled me with a happiness that gradually spread to my entire body. "Thank you very much."

My kyara-ben were hardly beautiful enough to warrant compliments at this stage, but someday I would catch up to Elvia-san. I wouldn't rush. But I wouldn't dawdle. If I worked at it, I was sure I could get there.

I had the time.

"Yeah. It's really, really good."

I looked at him, watched the smile on his face.

"There was a time when I believed that if I could just be with the person I loved, just be by his side, I didn't need anything else. That as long as I had those feelings, I could do anything. There was a time."

In a corner of my mind, I could still hear my mother's words.

Chapter Three
Seven Rotten Days

It was almost like watching a dance.

It was straightforward, unadorned. But somehow beautiful.

You could argue about whether it was closer to dancing or fighting. There was no question that, insofar as they were about executing every movement with the maximum efficiency, kata had a lot in common with dancing. If you wanted to maximize your power, you couldn't ignore your breathing and even pulse; you had to establish a rhythm.

It was almost like a physical exercise regimen, performed repeatedly following specific steps. A hand moved gently through the air—then a leg lashed out, suddenly, like a flash of light. Although it might look surprising to an observer, I suspected the movement had a logic all its own.

That fact made everything flow together seamlessly. It made it look natural, and strong, and above all, beautiful.

I was in the mansion's backyard. Unlike out front of the house, the ground here was pretty level—it was almost idyllic.

The person I'd been looking for was standing right in the middle of it, silently moving her body.

At first glance, she didn't seem very muscular. Her long hair was tied up in a bun, and she wore glasses; it made her look kind of like a librarian, although she also had a restrained beauty. When I saw her practicing her martial arts, though, it reminded me that she was one of those modern-day samurai who protected Japan—the soldiers of the Japan Self-Defense Force.

Koganuma Minori, Private First Class in the Ground Self-Defense Force.

She was a member of the unit that had been secretly posted here, to the Holy Eldant Empire, and she was also my bodyguard. Normally she lived up to that impression of quiet beauty, but when she really got mad she had been known to do things like kick a dragon in the nose. You didn't want to screw around with her.

Minori-san didn't appear to notice me watching her, but went on repeating the movements of her kata. She must have been really focused.

I assumed the framework for what she was doing came from the hand-to-hand combat training all members of the JSDF received (formally referred to, I had been told, as "Japan Self-Defense Force Empty-Handed Martial Training"). But I thought I could also see a hint of Chinese *quanfa*

in her movements, possibly a product of her upbringing in a dojo. She had the effortlessness of someone whose father had trained her in the martial arts since she was a girl—her movements looked as instinctual as an animal's.

I couldn't hold back a "Wow..."

...because with each move she executed, the soft (but certainly not drooping), impactful bust under her tank top gave a great jiggle. *Bounce, bounce. Whoa.* Soon I found my eyes pinned there.

Minori-san had complained to me in the past that a big chest got in her way, and that even if she wrapped it, it was often uncomfortable when she moved quickly. Speaking as an observer, I considered it a blessing, but then, I didn't have to live with it.

Ahh... If indeed it causes her so much trouble, then let me support her all-too-soft, all-too-bouncy bust with my own two hands... Gently, pushing up from below.

And so on, my mind overflowing with pervy thoughts that, I suspected, were perilously near obvious.

"Oh, hey." Minori-san finally noticed I was there, breaking off her kata. "Shinichi-kun..."

"Sorry to interrupt," I said, walking up to her.

"It's no big deal," she said, shaking her head. "I was almost done, anyway." She took off her glasses. Then she grabbed a towel hanging from a branch of a nearby tree and wiped the sweat from her face. The sight of it gleaming on her neck, her arms unabashedly exposed, was at once innocent and erotic, giving my libido a healthy kick.

Ahh... Look at the sweat drip from her hair and down into that soft valley. I found myself unwittingly following it with my eyes.

Oh, sweat! Sweat! What a lucky fluid you are! If only I could be so—

"You could have just said something, you know."

"Huh? Oh, uh, I mean, you were busy training and all..."

I refocused on Minori-san's face as quickly as I could. Obviously, I wasn't about to tell her that I had forgotten all about what I came here for when I was taken by surprise by a pair of roguish... Well, I *could* tell her, but I feared the consequences.

"So, uh, Minori-san, here." Hoping to steer the conversation away from immediate danger, I reached into my pocket. I hadn't come here to spy on Minori-san's boobs—I mean, her morning training—but to give her this.

“Your key. Try not to lose it, okay?” I pulled it out of my pocket and passed it to Minori-san, who had put her glasses back on in the meantime.

It was a card slightly smaller than the palm of my hand. It was a square made mostly of metal, but the center consisted of a transparent material that seemed somewhere between plastic and glass. Whatever the material was, you could see a rainbow in it under light. I held it up to the sun; it was surprisingly beautiful.

“Thanks, that’s a big help. I keep forgetting about this thing.”

“That’s understandable. They only introduced them really recently,” I said. “Even Myusel forgets sometimes.”

The card was a “key.” A magical item meant to help with the mansion’s security. The JSDF had set up some electronic alarm doodads around the perimeter of our house, but there was always the possibility that this world’s magic could allow someone to slip by them undetected, so we supplemented the electronic alarms with these new, magical ones.

They consisted of two magical devices: these keys, and a “lock.” And the keys were, well, key.

We used the term “lock” because it was a convenient way to think about it, but this magical device did much more than keep a door from opening. When it activated, the room it was guarding became completely impregnable. Not just the door, but the walls, floor, and ceiling were all magically reinforced. They could repel almost any magical or conventional weapon, up to and including firearms.

You wound up with, in essence, a magical panic room. You could be under attack from explosive ordinance, and if you shut yourself up in that room, nobody could beat, bash, or force their way in; the occupant of the room could just sit tight and wait for help to arrive. That was the idea, anyway.

When it came to magical items as useful as this, though, there was usually a catch. Something that could, let’s say, be improved. In this case, the magical security system—much like a self-locking door at a hotel—activated as soon as you closed the door. In other words, if you accidentally went out without your key, it would be locked down tight in the room you just left. And for security reasons, these keys were extremely difficult to duplicate.

For the time being, we had exactly two copies of each key: each of us carried the key to our own room, and Myusel was responsible for a set of

spares, just in case. It was the spare key to Minori-san's room that I had just delivered to her.

It wasn't really her fault; none of us were used to this new magic security system yet. It was all too easy to just walk out the door without your key. The house itself didn't really look any different, so our old habits often just took over.

And so you ended up with things like what had happened this morning, with Minori-san locked firmly out of her room.

"I've got to hurry up and get used to this," she said, pocketing the key with a thin smile.

"We need to get Brooke and Cerise in on it, too, huh?" I said.

Brooke and Cerise were a lizardman couple who worked at our house. At the moment, though, they weren't home. Brooke used to be a hero of his people, and Cerise was the chieftain's daughter, so they held a pretty high place in lizardman society. It sometimes demanded that they appear at tribal councils in place of the chieftain. They had recently asked for about ten days off to go back home for that purpose.

The new security system had been installed while they were away, so when they got back, there would be a lot to explain.

"It's almost time for breakfast," Minori-san said. "Shall we head inside?"

"Sure," I said with a nod, and then we walked back to the house.

I headed for the dining area with Minori-san, who was now dressed in the standard uniform of the JSDF, a white shirt and pencil skirt. When we arrived, two other women were already there.

"Sorry, did we keep you waiting?" we asked as we took our seats.

"No, everyone just got here," replied a smiling girl with twintails and a maid uniform as she set out food. Myusel Fourant.

She was a half-elf who worked at our mansion, and my heart's oasis. Er, okay, I know that's kind of an overwrought way of putting it, but she really worked hard for me, and I was grateful for it.

This breakfast, of course, was her doing. Then there was—

"Shinichi-sama, hurry, hurry up!"

This came from the other girl at the table, who was rocking excitedly in her chair. She wore a tube top and pants that left her shoulders and midriff exposed—in fact, it left a lot of her exposed, so you could see her toned muscles and darkish skin. It made her look not so much sexy as just in very good shape.

Also visible were her floppy ears and a big, puffy tail that poked out from beside her chair. She was a beast person—a lycanthrope. A werewolf, if you will. Not the scary monster kind, but a sort of clumsy, sort of silly, weirdly likable dog-girl.

Elvia Harneiman. That (in case you hadn't guessed) was her name.

"Wait a second," I said. "Where's Hikaru-san?"

"It seemed like he was awake when I checked on him in his room earlier," Myusel said.

"I wonder if he went back to sleep or something."

"Good morning, everyone. What a uselessly bright morning."

Speak of the devil, as they say. Hikaru-san walked into the dining area.

Even though it was first thing in the morning, he appeared in his full Gothic Lolita regalia, complete with plenty of lace, shaking his long, black hair luxuriantly. He was such a vibrant picture of beauty that it felt like a waste that he had to be a man.

Ayasaki Hikaru-san.

He was Japanese, like me and Minori-san, and he was technically the assistant to Amutech's general manager—i.e., me.

He was, as I've noted, a man. But he was so feminine that when you looked at him, it was hard not to wonder if there'd been some mistake.

"Uselessly bright...?" I asked.

First thing in the morning, and he was already barely making sense. Hikaru-san was a classic chuunibyou—sometimes he said things that sounded sort of melancholy, but also incomprehensible.

"Where there is light, there is shadow," Hikaru-san responded. "Light and darkness are two sides of the same coin. A world of utter light would be incomplete—for after all, the world was born from chaos."

"Uh...huh."

This was pretty much how he always talked, so I let it go in one ear and out the other.

Once Hikaru-san was safely seated, Myusel took her own place.

"Looks like we're all here," Minori-san said, surveying the table.

“So.” I brought my palms together. Everyone else imitated me. Minori-san and Hikaru-san aside, all the Eldant people at this table were just imitating the custom of their master—which was to say, the custom of Japan.

“*Itadakimasu*,” I said.

“*Itadakimasu*,” everyone chorused, and then we started in on breakfast.

Myusel always made delicious food, so we always got totally caught up in eating. For a while, only the clatter of knives and forks could be heard in the dining area.

“Oh yeah,” Minori-san said suddenly. “Shinichi-kun, Hikaru-kun, are you going today?”

“Going?” I asked. “Going where?”

“To the garrison. Today’s delivery day, right?”

“Ahh...”

Now that I thought about it, she was right. “Delivery day” referred to the day when goods from Japan would be dropped off with the JSDF. The shipment would include weapons and consumables, of course, but also personal items not directly related to Amutech’s business ventures. I could usually get manga, or anime DVDs or whatever, brought directly to me as part of my work, but certain ingredients, sweets, and that sort of thing would only reach the Eldant Empire on these regular scheduled deliveries. For example, I sometimes got sudden cravings for Sapp**o Bar-B-Q flavored chips, so I had a set amount delivered with each shipment.

“Not me,” Hikaru-san said, as he sliced his breakfast into bites of almost obsessively similar size. “I didn’t order anything.” It hadn’t been that long since he’d arrived here, so there probably just wasn’t much he wanted yet. As for me, as much as I loved Myusel’s cooking, sometimes I just wanted Japanese sweets or junk food.

“Cool,” Minori-san said. “Shinichi-kun, what about you?”

“Uhh...”

What *had* I ordered this time?

Minori-san must have guessed what the problem was, because she whipped out her smartphone and began swiping along. “You should be getting some cargo in today, Shinichi-kun. If you can’t make it, I’ll plan on picking your stuff up along with mine. All the paperwork is done, so we can go together if you want.”

“Okay, sounds good to me.”

“Awesome.” Minori-san smiled and put her phone back in her pocket. “Let’s go get our stuff after we’re done eating, then. We can come home, make sure everything’s there, and still have time to get to school.”

She sure knew how to schedule. Among many other things, I should add. It was enough to make me jealous—after all, you could look up *softie* in the dictionary and find my picture. Minori-san, on the other hand, was decisive, could get work done, and managed to be both sweet and strong at the same time. A reliable person all around. Add to that the fact that she was cute, had a great endowment, and could even cook a decent meal (even if she usually didn’t, since Myusel handled kitchen duties)... Why had I never noticed how pretty much perfect she was?!

These were the thoughts that ran through my head as I watched Minori-san eat.

“All done.”

“What, already?!”

While I sat there staring, Minori-san had already finished her meal. She ate almost as much as I did, but she was the first person at the table to finish. I guess a healthy body really does make for a healthy appetite. She certainly had more muscle, and probably a quicker metabolism, than I did.

“We can go as soon as you’re ready, Shinichi-kun,” she said.

“Uh, sure!”

She was already standing up from the table. I nodded, then wolfed down the rest of my breakfast.

The regular deliveries were usually made to the JSDF garrison. And here in the Holy Eldant Empire, that meant a corner of the training grounds in the castle town. The JSDF had rented a part of those grounds from the empire and constructed a simple barracks there.

Incidentally, it hadn’t escaped me that it wasn’t entirely fair that I got to live in a mansion while the soldiers had to make do with a jerry-rigged barracks, but apparently the JSDF had turned down more plush accommodations. Something about maintaining a low profile and not going soft or something.

Anyway...

“Ahh, it’s here, it’s here!”

We got out of the bird-drawn carriage and started walking toward the pile of shipping containers. It wasn't just our stuff; it included military supplies and personal items for the personnel stationed in the empire, so it was a pretty good pile. Those personnel, of course, included Minori-san.

"You look awfully happy," I said to her.

She looked downright cheerful, in fact. More than that, really—like a cat who'd heard a tin of food being opened, or a dog that sees its owner getting the leash. Excited. She was light on her feet, as if she might just start skipping along. It was unusual to see Minori-san quite so pleased.

"You can tell?" She glanced at me. She looked like the epitome of *bursting with happiness*. She was like a completely different person from the young woman I had seen training that morning. The austere, disciplined air was gone, replaced by a sense that she might start drooling at any time.

"I'm getting the sequel to this one book today, and I'm really, really looking forward to it!"

Ah, so that was it. I knew what kind of books Minori-san was into, and this "sequel" was probably something like—

"It's called Super-M Spectacles, and it's about this hot teacher who—"

"I'll pass on the synopsis, thanks." I waved away her explanation.

By and large, I'm capable of loving almost any kind of otaku work. There are hardly any genres, tropes, or character types I inherently dislike. Take the simple matter of heroines: be she a maid, a refined girl of the upper crust, well-endowed or practically flat, tsundere or boyish, I can love them all equally. I like fantasy a lot, but clickety-clack hard SF is okay, too, and antiheroes and harem romantic comedies both get the thumbs-up from me. I guess "little sister stuff" and things where you're supposed to feel moe about guys hit a little too close to home, and I'm not a big fan—but it's not like I would criticize anyone else for liking them.

The point is, I can enjoy almost anything.

Unfortunately, BL is more almost than anything. In fact, I don't get it at all. It's not exactly that I *dis*like it. You could say I just don't have the taste.

"Oh, what?" Minori-san said, annoyed that I had interrupted her explanation.

Aw, she's so cute when she pouts like that.

Wait, was she really older than me?

"I think this would be a great series for you to try, Shinichi-kun. You never know. It might open new doors for you..."

“Uh, I’d prefer to leave those doors shut. Thanks anyway.”

“Aww.”

“You’re disappointed? What were you hoping for, anyway?”

“Obviously, that—”

“You know what? Forget I asked.”

It was a perfectly ordinary conversation in its way. Before long we had arrived at the shipping crates, where the members of the garrison had gathered.

“Good morning,” Minori-san said, saluting.

“Good morning,” the others responded, returning the gesture. I guess there was still room for military discipline around here.

Minori-san, though, promptly grinned and said, “Okay, where’s my stuff?”

“Ahh...” One of the soldiers—Captain Satou—frowned and sort of groaned. “Koganuma. I’m, uh, very sorry to tell you this, but...” His expression got progressively darker.

“What’s wrong?” Minori-san asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“They told us that there was a bit of, er, an accident, and some of the cargo hasn’t arrived yet. Specifically, uh, yours.”

“...What?”

“We do have your things, Kanou-kun. We asked when Koganuma’s cargo was going to get here, but they said it would be next week at the earliest.”

“Next... *week*...?” Minori-san’s face tightened.

Next week meant, in essence, that her stuff would be sent with the next regular delivery. She wouldn’t see *Super-M Spectacles* or whatever for at least seven days.

I felt bad for her, I guess. She had been on cloud nine, and now shock and disappointment had taken over her face. It was hard to watch.

“Your cargo’s over there, Kanou-kun,” Captain Satou said, pointing.

“Oh, thanks.” I was grateful that the container he had pointed to was in a spot that let me put my back to Minori-san.

As I walked away, though, I could hear her muttering behind me: “Next week... new book... *Super-M Spectacles*...”

I glanced back. Minori-san looked like she might just collapse where she was standing. It was like, if this were a manga, she would just be white

as ash with no fill and no screen tone. Like if you gave her a little tap, she would crumble into dust.

...Huh?! Was it really that big a deal?!

Her veritable despair was obvious to everyone, and even the other soldiers didn't seem quite sure what to say to her; they just stood there looking uncomfortably at each other.

"Ahh," I sighed. I felt bad for her, but what were you gonna do? I looked back in the direction of the shipping crate Captain Satou had pointed out. "Hup!" I pulled a cardboard box from the crate and opened the lid. When I was sure it was really my stuff, I picked up the box and went back to Minori-san. Now we just had to get home.

Minori-san was still standing there, frozen.

"Minori-san," I said.

No answer.

"Minori-san."

No answer.

"Heh heh heh! 'Ey, lady, them's some fine melons y' got there!"

Still nothing.

Uh-oh. This was serious.

I took a deep breath, then bellowed, "*Private First Class Koganuma Minori!!*"

"Huh?! Wha?! Yessir!" She blinked rapidly, then her eyes focused on me. "Oh... Sh-Shinichi-kun. Morning."

Morning, what? Were you asleep?

"Minori-san, let's go."

"Oh..... Y-Yeah, sure..."

This time I at least got a nod out of her, but she didn't show any sign of moving. In the end, I had to take her hand and drag her back to the carriage.

The next day. Myusel told me something was wrong with the clock in her room, so I went to take a look.

"Hm?"

I was confronted with a big grandfather clock of a muddy brown color, like the kind you might see in some western period piece. The design was antique—or if you like, retro—with the clock face on top and a glass door

below looking in on the pendulum. It had to be at least a full meter tall, and reminded me of the clock in the children's rhyme. Not that it was bought on the morn of the day that *I* was born or anything.

The way it told time with a shorter hand and a longer hand was the same as in our world. Given that the length of a day here was roughly the same as on Earth, that made a certain amount of sense. The difference was, the numbers on the face were written in Eldant characters, and the divisions of time were slightly different from what I was used to, so I normally ignored this clock. I typically referred to the *G-Sh*ck* on my wrist, or at least to my cell phone.

"It's stopped all right," I said as I looked at it. The hands were frozen precisely at what I would think of as six o'clock. The pendulum sat completely still. "I guess there's no chance it's battery-powered?"

"It's spring-powered... but winding it didn't help."

"A spring, huh?"

In other words, getting this thing running again wasn't going to be as simple as swapping the battery.

"What to do. Maybe it's full of dust, or lost a gear...?" I pulled the clock away from the wall as I muttered to myself, moving around behind it. Maybe if I shook it or smacked it or something...

"Hmm..."

But the hands were still frozen, and the pendulum still hung immobile. I should have known it wasn't going to be that easy. A layperson like me could hardly take it apart and clean it, though. One wrong move and I could *really* break it.

So what to do?

I glanced at Myusel.

Minori-san happened to be wandering by, and stuck her head in the open door of the room. "What's up?" she asked.

"Clock's stopped," I said as she came in. "I thought maybe I could just fiddle with it and get it working again, but..."

"...Fiddle...?" Minori-san murmured.

Huh? She sounded—

"...*Fiddle*. That's... dirty..."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

No sooner had I spoken than Minori-san blinked as if awakening from a dream.

“Uh, never mind,” I said quickly.

Had I misheard her? Yeah. That had to be it. Minori-san seemed as surprised as I was. It had to have just been my mistake.

“If you can’t get it working again, we should call a specialist,” Minori-san said, sounding as calm as ever once more.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I gave the clock a gentle tap. Of course, it didn’t flinch.

“Gadgets with a lot of wooden pieces can be affected by the humidity in the air,” she said. “It makes the parts expand and contract. Give it a few minutes and then try winding the spring again. If that doesn’t work, we’ll ask someone to come look at it.”

“Right,” I nodded. I liked how quickly Minori-san made these sorts of decisions.

“I do think for the household’s sake, we should get it fixed as soon as possible,” she said.

“Yeah.”

I didn’t use this clock myself, but others might. Myusel, in particular, probably used it pretty often to parcel out her time for chores.

“I mean, it’s so sad...”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s bad enough that they can only ever pass by each other, and even worse that it only happens once an hour—but now they’ll be apart from each other forever, frozen in place...” Minori-san sounded positively tragic.

My eyes went dot-shaped. Myusel, for her part, was checking her magic ring, convinced that it had gone on the fritz.

I didn’t understand what she was talking about.

“Minori-san,” I said.

“Yes?”

“What are you talking about? What’s sad?”

I had been talking about the clock...

“Huh? I mean...” She paused before something seemed to dawn on her and she said, “Ah... Forget it.”

I wonder what that was all about?

“It’s fine. It’s nothing. I hope the clock gets fixed. Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

The smile on her face was obviously forced and she was talking too fast; she was trying to hide something. Then she spun on her heel and left the room.

After a long moment, Myusel and I stuck our heads out the door, watching Minori-san retreat down the hall. Myusel whispered, “What do you think is wrong with Minori-sama?”

“No idea,” I answered. All I could do was shake my head.

Several hours after the events in the living room...

We were already getting towards the middle of the night. Myusel was done with her chores, and I was teaching her Japanese in the living area. We used to do this discreetly in the kitchen or my office, but all the lights in the living room had proven pretty convenient, and it had now become the home base for the Kanou School of Japanese Language Education (student population: one).

“Shinichi-sama, how do you read this?”

“What, this?” I said, looking at the kanji Myusel was pointing to. “It says *tenjou*.”

She could already read hiragana and katakana pretty much without trouble, so now she was tackling texts that included kanji. She was capable of holding basic conversations in Japanese without the help of her magic ring, but reading kanji without any aids was still a bit much for her. I mean, there are native *kun-yomi* readings, Chinese-derived *on-yomi* readings, scads of homonyms... Come to think of it, Japanese is kind of a pain in the neck.

Instead of using a textbook, I was having her translate light novels, on the assumption that they would be comparatively easier to read.

“Say, Shinichi-sama...” Myusel looked down at the open book, sounding like something had just occurred to her. “What does *tenjou* mean?”

“Huh?”

“I sort of understand from reading the book, but not quite... *Yuka* and *kabe*, too.”

She looked truly puzzled. I was pretty surprised to realize she was only now asking about these words. But I said, “You know—*tenjou* is the

ceiling. *Yuka* is the floor. *Kabe* are walls."

I almost felt like I was getting confused myself, having to spell it out like that, but when I really thought about what Myusel was saying, I realized the problem was due to linguistic differences. In the Eldant language, ceilings, floors, and walls were all referred to as "walls." Specifically, as I understood it, they were the "upper wall," "side walls," and "lower walls." In so far as they all fulfilled the function of defining the space of a room, they really were sort of the same thing, just in different places.

Once in a while, you hear how people who live in cold places have a million different words for snow. When you're faced with snow and ice 24/7, it becomes intimately intertwined with your daily life, and constantly referring to just "snow" wouldn't be very helpful. So instead the various different states and types of snow are treated almost like separate objects with their own special vocabulary.

In any event, our magic rings technically functioned as translation machines, but what they really did was take the concepts we were thinking of and turn them into vocabulary the other person would recognize. So Myusel might use the Eldant expression "upper wall," but I would understand it as "ceiling." But the rings didn't work for translating a written text.

"I tried asking Minori-sama, but I couldn't quite understand her explanation..."

"Oh, you did?"

"Uh-huh."

I wondered how exactly Minori-san had tried to explain the concept. I would have thought she would be better at it than I was.

"What happened was..."

And then, a little distraught, she told me the following story.

Myusel had begun working on her Japanese on her own for a bit before we were to study together. While reading, she had come across these perplexing words, *ceiling*, *floor*, and *walls*, and although the context gave her an idea of what they must mean, she couldn't be sure, because her own language didn't distinguish among them.

Minori-san happened to be passing by the living room at just that moment, and Myusel asked her what the relationship was between a floor and a ceiling.

“A floor and a ceiling...” Minori-san had replied vacantly. “They can only ever stare longingly at each other, unable to touch, the ultimate form of love.”

Huh? Hang on, what the heck are you talking about?

Her response was so dumb I found myself shooting one-liners at her right in the middle of Myusel’s flashback.

Myusel told me that Minori-san went on chatting happily after that, but Myusel couldn’t understand what she was saying.

Well, I wouldn’t, either!

“It just didn’t make any sense,” Myusel said apologetically. “I’m sure if I were smarter...”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I don’t think intelligence has anything to do with it.” Myusel’s shoulders remained slumped. “Look, don’t let it bother you,” I went on. “I mean, you really shouldn’t.”

“Sigh...”

“I can explain it to you, anyway. You already know that *kabe* is a side wall. So *yuka* is a—”

Thus I went on teaching Myusel, trying to ignore the ominous feeling building inside me.

When Myusel and I were done with our Japanese lesson, I headed down the hall towards my room with the intention of getting some sleep. But then I saw someone standing in the hallway. It was Minori-san.

“Huh?” I stopped. “Minori-san, what are you doing there?”

“Shinichi-kun...”

She was dressed the way she had been the previous morning, in pants and a tank top, a pretty casual outfit.

“Are you practicing your martial arts this late at night?” I asked, noticing the towel in her right hand.

“Eh, y’know,” she said. “Just trying to chase away the bad thoughts...”

“Bad thoughts?” In spite of myself, my eyes started to wander down to where the cleft of her fantastic chest was visible above the neckline of her tank top. Talk about bad thoughts.

Minori-san shrugged and said, “I’m trying to get over the pain of not being able to read my new book.”

“Oh, I get it.”

That *Super-M Spectacles* thing again. I was actually sort of impressed that it had affected her so deeply.

“They do say exercise is the cure for many ills,” I said. “So, all done training?” I could see a healthy glow in Minori-san’s skin, and there were traces of sweat on her tank top. A sweaty dude was uninteresting at best and kind of depressing at worst, but on a beauty like Minori-san it had a certain allure of its own...

“Yeah. I was just going to change...”

“Gotcha.”

Then we both stood there. I didn’t say anything. She didn’t say anything. She just stood by the door to her room, the silence spreading between us.

“Minori-san?”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you go into your room?”

“.....Oh. I just...”

She looked away from me, creasing her brow. I glanced down and noticed that her left hand was digging in her pocket.

Could it be...?

“Minori-san, don’t tell me...”

“...Eh heh.”

She smiled shyly and stuck out her tongue in a way that definitely made her look too cute to be older than me.

“You forgot your key again...”

“What are we going to do, Shinichi-kun?”

“We’ll just have to ask Myusel for the spare again.”

“I guess that’s our only choice, huh...” Her shoulders slumped dispiritedly. She had just needed the spare yesterday—for this to happen two days in a row was understandably embarrassing. Still, we couldn’t leave Minori-san standing outside her room forever.

“I wonder where Myusel went,” I muttered, turning around—just in time, coincidentally, to see her on the stairs. “Myusel!” I called out.

She turned toward me, then came hurrying in our direction.

“Perfect timing,” I said.

“Yes? What do you need?”

“Could you lend Minori-san the spare key to her room again?” I said with a bit of a smile.

“I’m sorry, Myusel,” Minori-san said, looking remorseful. “I forgot again.”

Myusel being as nice as she was, I fully expected her to just smile a little herself and say, “Sure thing.”

But instead she looked blankly at me and Minori-san. “Huh? Uhh...” She gradually looked more and more troubled.

“What’s wrong?”

Myusel was hesitant. “I gave her the spare key yesterday, and...”

“What? No way,” Minori-san said, a note of panic entering her voice. “I mean, Shinichi-kun brought it to me, and then—”

“I... I never got it back...”

Minori-san stiffened. Myusel had no reason to lie about this. Meaning...

“Minori-san,” I said, “is the spare in your room, too?”

“No *way*!” Minori-san wailed, shoving her hands back into her pockets. Unfortunately, if just looking hard enough were all it took to find something, she would have already had the key before I showed up.

“I can’t believe this! This isn’t happening!” Minori-san tried desperately to turn the doorknob, but of course the door wasn’t about to open. She started pounding on it as if she thought she might be able to break in, but the magically reinforced door didn’t even flinch.

“I can’t believe this...”

It was clearly dawning on her that no amount of struggle was going to gain her access to her room. She wobbled and then sank to her knees, resting her hands on the floor. She was the very picture of despair.

Myusel and I were both alarmed.

“M-Minori-san?!”

“Minori-sama?!”

“No... What do I do...” Minori-san just stared fixedly at a point on the floor as if we didn’t exist for her. I guess a bit of shock was understandable. I wouldn’t be happy either, if I suddenly couldn’t get into my room. But still...

“U-Uh, Minori-sama, if you need some clothes, you’re welcome to use mine, if you don’t mind,” Myusel said. Then she realized that the chest, at least, was not likely to fit, and quickly added, “If we, you know, if we ask Hikaru-sama to tailor them a little, I’m sure...”

Minori-san didn't make a sound, crouched over as if she was pretending to be the orz emoticon.

Uh... gosh. Was it really that bad?

"If there's anything I can do," I said hesitantly, "just..."

But Minori-san didn't react to me, either. She stared at the floor, muttering something to herself.

"...Can't read my new book... Can't get in my room..."

"Huh? New book?"

"Can't even read the old ones... Ahhh..."

"Is *that* what you're worried about?!" I shot at her reflexively.

She suddenly sat upright and shouted back, "What else could I be worried about?! Oh, what am I going to doooo?!" She hugged herself and flailed back and forth.

...Is this what we've come to?

She looked like she was going through withdrawal from some kind of narcotic. And there was nothing Myusel or I could do for her as we stood there in the hall.

Well, if you don't have a key, you can make one that fits, right? In other words, call a locksmith.

Hence, the next day found us at Holy Eldant Castle first thing in the morning. The castle was a massive structure that looked a lot like a really big version of a Middle Ages European fortress, but in fact it was a mountain that had been hollowed out with magic. That made it about as strong as strong gets.

In one corner of the gigantic building, we were being ushered into one of the palace's various audience chambers.

"Hmm...?"

On the far (far, far) side of the room, sitting on a raised throne, was the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire: Her Majesty Petralka an Eldant III.

Maybe words like "Her Majesty" and "the empress" evoke images of stern, authoritarian figures, but little could be further from the truth. Seated on the throne was a young woman so delicate she could almost have been a doll. She looked young enough to carry around an elementary schooler's backpack, but in reality she was my own age. Atop her silver-haired head

she wore a crown full of jewels, material evidence that she was a ruler, but truth be told, she wasn't very imposing.

"Can't you do something about this? Seeing Minori-san so upset is, I dunno, kind of disturbing..." I glanced at Minori-san, who was standing beside me.

The fact that she was there suggested that for the time being, she remembered she was my bodyguard—but I wasn't entirely confident I could count on her in a pinch. She obviously hadn't slept—she looked exhausted, with big bags under her eyes. What a waste of a beautiful woman.

"Hmm..." Petralka crossed her arms, her expression vexed.

"Myusel says only the magic-user who cast the locking spell can undo it..." I offered.

"Indeed," Petralka said. There were plenty of what you might call royal mages at the castle, but if just anyone could dispel the magic lock, there would be no point in having it.

"Just making sure," I said, "but you don't happen to have a set of spares here at the castle...?"

"No," Petralka said flatly.

The old man standing next to her—Prime Minister Zahar—nodded as if to confirm this. "We never imagined such a situation might arise, you see."

"And there's no other way to open the door?"

"Normally, one would call the magician who created the magical device," Petralka said. "That's the quickest way to resolve a problem."

"Okay then!" Minori-san said, brightening up.

"However," Petralka went on, shaking her head and casting a glance at Minori-san, "though we may call him, the man is very busy. At the moment, he's headed to a remote frontier area far distant from the capital. His abilities are much needed in the rough places and battlefields of the land, you see. Even if we called him back immediately, his return would take days. We don't even know precisely where he is right now."

She looked at the young man who stood to the other side of her throne. He had the same silver hair as she did, along with a slim, elegant beauty. He was Minister Garius en Cordobal. One of Petralka's relatives, a knight, and a close personal advisor.

"Even if by good fortune our communication should reach that spellcaster, and he should come back, it would take a certain amount of

time," Garius said. "About six months, I would estimate."

"S-Six *months*?" Minori-san repeated, her voice almost breaking. You could practically see the *boooong* sound effect written above her head. "What about some other mage...?" she asked, without much hope.

"Not possible," Petralka said firmly. "We advise you to wait patiently for the creator's return."

So there was no choice but to wait for this wizard to get back? Even though we had no idea how long that would be? With Minori-san locked out of her room the whole time?

"Oh... my... *God*..." Minori-san's eyes had gone blank again. We'd come to Petralka hoping that, as the absolute ruler of this empire, she might be able to do something—even though we knew it was a lot to ask. And in fact, it had turned out to be too much.

Minori-san looked like she was only staying on her feet because of Petralka and her advisors—in other words, because we were technically in public. Otherwise, it looked like she would have collapsed to all fours as she had the night before. In fact, she looked like she might have just gone out cold.

"My... My BL..." she murmured vacantly.

Petralka arched an eyebrow. "*Bee ell*?"

"If Minori-san can't get into her room, it means she can't read her BL books," I explained.

"What...?!" came the startled response. From...

"Garius?" Petralka said, casting a dubious eye on the knight beside her.

Ahh, yes. This distinguished, beautiful, aristocratic knight-minister had certain tendencies that made him like to borrow BL books from Minori-san. He was being infected by otaku culture, too, in his own way...

"Six months? Six whole months...? Ha ha ha ha..." A laugh came from deep in her throat.

"M-Minori-san, just remember, the new shipment will be here soon..." It looked like despair had driven her to the brink of madness, and I was anxious to talk her down.

If only.

"Ha, hah... Ooh hoo hoo... ufu-fu-fu... *fu-fu-fu-fu-fu... FU*!"

Uh-oh. Did she mean fu as in □? As in, rotten? Her laughter was starting to sound really depraved. But it was already out of my control...

"*FU FU FU FU FUFUFUFU*□□□□□□□..."

Rotten, rotten, rotten. The crazed noise poured from her half open lips, and all I could do was stare helplessly.

The first signs of an unmistakable change came the next morning.

We were having breakfast, like always. Gathered in the dining area, like always.

Me, Myusel, Elvia, Hikaru-san, Minori-san. All sitting in our chairs.

Everyone looked the same as usual. But there was an oppressive air in the room.

It originated, needless to say, with Minori-san. She sat with her hands braced against her knees, obviously not feeling well at all. In fact, she looked almost lifeless, staring listlessly at the table—she looked like a drug addict, or someone with a terminal disease or something. Little sighs constantly came out of her mouth.

"Is Minori-san okay?" Hikaru-san asked me quietly.

"Not sure," I murmured.

"I never expected it to be this bad..."

"Me neither. You don't have any BL, do you, Hikaru-san?"

"Not one volume, I'm afraid," he said with a shrug. "You know me—I'm all about cosplay. Homoeroticism isn't really my thing."

"...Oh, uh, oh yeah. That's right, huh? Sorry."

BL and beautiful guys go hand in hand, so I guess someone who enjoys dressing up as attractive women probably wouldn't be into it. Not that I would know for sure.

That meant, though, that nobody here had any BL-type stuff we could lend Minori-san. I even thought for a moment that maybe Garius had something on loan from her, but then I remembered he had already returned it quite a while ago.

So apparently this was going to go on until the next shipment arrived...

That would be in four days. Was Minori-san going to be like this the entire time? Honestly, the thought frightened me.

"A-Anyway, let's eat!" I said, a little too loudly, eager to dispel some of the gloom radiating from our resident WAC. "Let's enjoy this nice breakfast before it goes cold!" I turned to Minori-san specifically. "Come on, Minori-san, a good day starts with a full stomach!" I made my smile wider.

Minori-san looked up at me slowly. Her lips slowly formed two moaning syllables.

“Hooomooo...”

That set me on the back foot. “M-Minori...san...?”

“Homoooo...” She looked at me, her gaze empty. I didn’t know if she had completely given up, or if this was a sort of self-mockery, or if withdrawal had completely broken her brain, but her lips were twisted into a sort of grim half-smile. The way she was smiling despite a total absence of emotion in her eyes was deeply unsettling. She looked like a zombie.

“Homoooo...”

“Wh—What’s wrong, Minori-san?!” Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. But she just kept repeating “Homooo,” that smile never wavering.

“Could this be... Vitamin BL Deficiency?!” Hikaru-san exclaimed.

“Wh-What the heck is that?” I shot back.

“It’s a condition unique to fujoshi who desperately want to watch or read some BL but can’t. They fixate completely on one word, ‘homo,’ and can’t think about anything else...”

“Is that even a real thing?!”

Granted, Hikaru-san’s description sounded an awful lot like what we were observing in Minori-san. But I had never heard of any unique fujoshi illnesses...

Hikaru-san only shrugged. “Nah. I made it up just now.”

“...Bah!”

Don’t give me that innocent little stuck-out tongue! It’s very cute!

This guy was just too much.

“Er... Well,” I said, “l-let’s just go ahead and eat.”

“Homooo...”

“*I—Itadakimasu*...”

“Homooo...”

Not quite sure what to do, I brought my hands together, and Minori-san, although still fixated on that single word, did the same, then started eating. Her brain might have been in the grip of BL withdrawal, but at least her body retained its instinctive drive to take in nutrients.

Having said that...

“Homooo...”

Pause.

“Homooo...”

Pause.

Minori-san’s repetitive wail echoed around the room, like the chanting of monks at a funeral.

What the heck was going on here?

It was pretty hard for the rest of us to enjoy our meals with Minori-san looking as if at any moment she might pounce down on all fours and go in search of BL to absorb like some Ultimate All-Purpose Humanoid Decisive Battle Weapon. Even Myusel’s typically delicious cooking was difficult to appreciate.

“M-Minori-sama, you okay?” Elvia ventured.

She was being polite. She was just worried about Minori-san, probably. I’m sure she didn’t for one second expect what came next.

The moment Elvia spoke to her, Minori-san stopped mechanically eating her breakfast. She looked at Elvia, haggard. There was a long silence.

"Minori-sama?"

"Elvia..." Abruptly, a light went on in Minori-san's eyes. Her expression brightened, her mouth twisting into a smile.

Uh-oh. This is bad, my instincts told me, but it was too late.

Minori-san, her eyes sparkling like a child who's spotted a long-desired toy, rose up from her chair and leaned across the table. She grabbed Elvia's hands before the beast girl could pull them away.

"How interested are you in naked men?"

"Huh?" Elvia asked blankly. She was probably still processing the question. "Uh, um..."

"You *are* interested in them, aren't you?"

"Minori-sa—"

"Are you interested or not?!" There was a crazed smile on her face. Elvia's expression was stiff, unable or unwilling to answer one way or the other. At last she seemed to understand what was wrong with Minori-san, but it was too little, too late.

Elvia shifted her shoulders this way and that, apparently trying to escape from Minori-san's grasp, but she couldn't seem to manage. Was she holding back, or did Minori-san's insanity give her the strength to overpower a werewolf?

"Shinichi-sama...!" She turned to me, almost in tears, but as none of us knew what to do, either, we all just looked away.

Sorry, Elvia... There's nothing more... we can do...

So the meal went on, until finally—

"I'm full!"

—we finished eating and hurried out of the dining area, leaving Elvia with Minori-san like a sacrifice to appease some angry god.

I know. It was a terrible thing to do. But what other choice did we have...?!

"Hey—Shinichi-sama?!"

Thank you, Elvia. We'll never forget your sacrifice!

I spoke, not to the girl shouting to me, but to her face floating in the blue sky (note: pure fantasy) as I left the dining room behind.

It was about time to go to school. After breakfast, I spent a few minutes lounging around in my room, then started getting ready to go.

Not that I had much to get ready. I mostly just had to make sure I was halfway presentable.

"You've got everything you need?" asked Myusel, waiting outside my room.

"Yeah, I think I'm all set," I nodded.

There was something about—I mean, this little exchange we had as I went off to work. The day I was dressed in a suit and Myusel straightened my necktie for me, we would be the very picture of a freshly married young couple. I admit, it made me blush a little.

Incidentally, Myusel didn't have to teach today, which was why she was staying home.

"You have your key?"

"Oh...!" I dug quickly through my pockets.

"Here you go." Myusel, in the meantime, had gone into my room and gotten the key from on top of my desk. She handed it to me, smiling. "I hope you have a great day today."

"Sure, thanks."

Argh, my maid is so dang cute!

I felt something almost like a tickle as I returned Myusel's smile. The two of us headed for the front door.

So far, so good. A normal morning.

"Oh..."

Down the hallway, I spotted Minori-san and Elvia. They were walking together, but both their shoulders were slumped, their backs arched like cats. Their footsteps were obviously heavy; it was clear even from here that they were depressed.

And they were coming this way.

"Wh-What's going on?" I asked. "Has it even gotten to you, Elvia...?"

Minori-san's condition was—well, if not all right, at least to be expected, but even Elvia was heaving these big sighs.

Minori-san turned her lifeless eyes on me and sighed deeply.

There was a piece of paper in her hand. It looked like there was some sort of picture on it. Had she gotten Elvia to draw something for her? Minori-san might not be able to get at her manga or novels, but Elvia could probably draw something approximating BL for her.

But if that was the case, why did both of them look like such zombies?

"Hm...?" Without really thinking about it, I glanced down at the sheet of paper Minori-san was holding.

And then I was struck dumb.

Yes, it was more or less what I had been expecting: a drawing of two naked men that filled the page. Young, strapping men standing intimidatingly with their arms crossed.

The picture, though, wasn't really done in the "moe" style—it was very realistic, as if the two guys had wandered in out of a photograph somewhere. I could probably have looked at an artsy, moe-ish BL illustration without gagging, but for me, this was a little much...

What's more, the crucial parts of the picture, the ones that would have been blanked out with a mosaic for civility's sake in most pictures, were rendered with impeccable fidelity in this one, so real that they looked like they might, uh, pop off the page, if you know what I mean. You could practically hear the two guys whispering, "Hey, baby. Have a look. Whatcha think?"

"Very... very big..." I said, unintentionally replying to the voices in my internal monologue.

I noticed that the stuff between their legs was a little sketchier and more manga-esque than the rest of the picture; Elvia had probably been drawing from her imagination there. She understood what a guy was supposed to look like, but she didn't have any firsthand experience of the details.

Elvia had once made a kyara-ben depicting a BL scene with spectacular quality, but in that case she'd had an example to work from—that is, she'd had a picture from a BL book to copy. She hadn't had to produce it from scratch.

Come to think of it, it was my understanding that Elvia had only hit puberty pretty recently. Since her siblings were all sisters, the only one of *those* she was likely to have seen might have been her dad's back when she was little and they could bathe together.

Whatever the case, though, I could tell this wasn't the sort of BL Minori-san had in mind. This was more of a 'hard gay' type thing—a far

cry from scenes of are-they-or-aren't-they-legal guys tangled up together to strains of classical music.

Ah, so that was it: Minori-san had had the bright idea of getting Elvia to draw her something, but when it turned out not to be what she wanted, she went on suffering from withdrawal, while for her part, Elvia was depressed that she couldn't understand what to draw.

Gah! Everyone was turning out to be so much trouble.

"I see now, naked guys alone aren't enough," Minori-san muttered to herself as Myusel and I stood there speechless. "It's the situation that makes it..."

Beside her, Elvia was keeping up her own private monologue. "It's... It's all my fault... If I were a better artist, I could make them look more real..."

"Uh, I think if they looked any more real, we'd have a serious problem on our hands," I said.

"Realism, that's what Minori-san needs to feel moe about them..."

Elvia, it seemed, was hung up on the idea that a lack of realism was what was keeping Minori-san from feeling moe about her BL drawings. But if you take "realism" to mean how much a drawing looks like the real thing, then Elvia was completely mistaken. Realism in art has more to do with whether readers (or viewers or listeners) *feel* like something is faithful to the reality it depicts. Sometimes, an exaggerated, "unreal" representation is the best way to get a response.

It might be tough, though, to get Elvia to understand that.

Elvia stopped where she was, still muttering. "More realism... Need to study the real thing..."

"Elvia...?" I said. I looked up from the picture as I felt her hungry eyes on me. They were gleaming dangerously.

"Shinichi-sama," she said, "strip down, please."

"Huh?" I was, suffice to say, surprised by the request.

"I need realism!"

"Uh, Elvia, I don't think the realism you're talking about—"

"I've never really *seen* a man's body. If I could just get a look at yours, Shinichi-sama, then I could draw something Minori-sama could get moe about!"

"I think your drawing is just great already, actually!" Granted, it was lacking something in detail between the legs—but I really didn't think that

was the main problem.

"Show it to me, Shinichi-sama," Elvia said, her gaze increasingly fixated on me. "I'm beggin' you... Shinichi-sama... Let me see you naked...!"

"I don't wanna! Where I come from, this is *harassment*!"

"I have to see the real thing... with my own eyes... *Yours*...!" She shambled toward me, holding both arms out in front of her like a zombie.

Ahh, crap, I'm done for!

It didn't look like I was going to get out of this without being indecently exposed.

"Nope! Uh-uh! No!" I scuttled backward moments before Elvia could grab me. Her fingers, bent like claws, swiped at thin air. "I—I've gotta go to school! See you!"

“Oh! Have a good day, Shinichi-sama!” Myusel called to me as I, seeking to escape immediate bodily danger, turned and fled.

Normally, Minori-san would accompany me as my bodyguard, but she wasn’t in a fit state to be at school right now.

“Ugh,” I said, giving into a long fit of the shakes.

I hurried toward the front door, where Hikaru-san was waiting. I could feel Minori-san’s and Elvia’s eyes boring into me the whole time.

Things only got worse the next day.

“Morning, everyone...”

Back in Japan, I had tended to just lounge around the house on Saturdays and Sundays. But since coming to Eldant, I had started to lead a more rigorous lifestyle, and my eyes opened early in the morning. I didn’t indulge in oversleeping just because it was the weekend—breakfast was the same time as always.

“...Er.”

The charged atmosphere in the dining area made my hair stand on end. The first thing I noticed as my eyes swept the room was Elvia, sitting in her chair, looking downcast and muttering to herself.

“What d’ I do...? What’s moe, anyway...? What angle would be the moe-est? What should I...?”

She was looking down, so I couldn’t see her eyes, and she didn’t so much as twitch a muscle as she sat there. It gave the impression that her lips had a life of their own, and frankly, it was pretty scary.

“Good morning, Shinichi-sama.” Myusel came out of the kitchen and greeted me where I stood frozen in front of Elvia.

“Hey, Myusel,” I said, “do you think Elvia looks a little worse than before...?”

“I tried talking to her, but she didn’t answer,” Myusel said worriedly.

I felt a gaze on me and looked up to see Hikaru-san, who was already seated. Our eyes met. He shrugged silently and shook his head. *It’s too late*, the gesture seemed to say.

Then I noticed: someone was missing. “Huh? Where’s Minori-san?”

If Elvia was getting worse, was it possible that Minori-san was, too? Had her symptoms gotten so bad she couldn’t even get out of bed?

Starting to worry, I was about to go to her room—her new room, which was one of the guest rooms—to check on her.

"Good *morning*, everyone!" a bright, cheerful voice burst out. Everyone but Elvia looked over in surprise.

"M-Minori-san?!"

Standing behind us was Minori-san, all sign of the previous day's depression gone as if it had been a delusion on our part.

Huh...?

"Hm? Why the weird looks?" Minori-san glanced from one of us to the next with a big smile, then practically skipped over to her seat. Our jaws collectively dropped to see her this way.

"Are you okay, Minori-san?" Hikaru-san asked suspiciously. Not even twenty-four hours before, she had been in the grip of severe BL withdrawal, not even able to hold a conversation. So what was *this* all about?

"Hmm? Am I okay how?" Minori-san asked, still smiling. Myusel and I looked at each other. "What are you two doing?" Minori-san interjected. "Hurry up, or your lovely, hot breakfasts will go cold! ☆"

She wasn't wrong. We obediently sat down, though we were still perplexed.

"Right then, *itadakimaaaasu*!" Minori-san exclaimed, and began eating with gusto.

"*I-Itadakimasu*," Myusel, Hikaru-san, and I echoed hesitantly before starting in on our breakfasts. Elvia started listlessly eating her food, too, muttering the whole time.

What in the world was going on here?

I glanced at Minori-san as I ate. She was energetically stuffing food into her mouth. Was she back to normal? Had she finally resigned herself to the situation? Myusel and Hikaru-san, maybe equally worried, were both stealing little looks at her, too.

Well, if she was really her normal self again, that was great, but...

No one said anything. The dining room was filled with the placid sounds of eating utensils.

There was something wrong here, I just didn't know what it was.

It was frustrating. In the end, no one could quite figure out the best way to start a conversation, and we finished our meal in silence. Except for Elvia, who murmured softly the whole time before going back to her room. Then Myusel excused herself to start cleaning up.

That left me, the broadly smiling Minori-san, and Hikaru-san, who was still watching Minori-san carefully.

"Guess I'll go back to my room, too," Hikaru-san said, dabbing his mouth with a napkin and standing up.

"Oh, uh, me too," I said, also standing quickly.

"Oh, hold on," Minori-san called to us before we could leave the dining room. We both turned around. She was looking at the two of us with that same giant grin. Behind her glasses, her eyes had turned into a happy little n.n thing, and the corners of her mouth were somewhere up near her ears.

What was going through her head?

Minori-san was just smiling, and yet... well, I *thought* she was smiling.

So why did I feel like my body was about to be torn apart by dread?

"I have a favor to ask." She got up and stood in front of me and Hikaru-san—between us and the door. As if to say, *You shall not pass*.

"Er, uh, Minori-san?"

Still smiling. Her face looked almost like a mask, in that her expression seemed to bear no connection to what she was feeling inside.

Hikaru-san and I found ourselves unable to move, as if pinned in place by some unseen force. Suddenly, Minori-san ducked out into the hallway, then immediately returned carrying a cardboard box. I hadn't noticed it earlier, but it must have been sitting there next to the dining room door all morning.

"Would you put these on for me?"

So saying, Minori-san put the box on the ground and pulled something out, spreading it out in front of us.

"......*Huh*?" Hikaru-san and I said in unison.

It was two pairs of clothes. Or... uniforms?

One was sort of a black leotard, something that looked an awful lot like a woman's swimsuit.

The other item was a set of black swim briefs—practically a banana hammock.

Minori-san left the clothes on the floor... and continued producing items from the cardboard box. Frills and headbands, frilly white aprons, bowties. Shoes. High-heeled shoes.

What was... going on here?

Wait... "Put these on"? She said "put these on," right?

Put them on *who*?

“Er, hey, uh, Minori-san...”

“Yeeeeesss?”

“I think this stuff is pretty weird to just ‘put on’...”

“How so?”

“Uh, how do you mean, how so?”

Minori-san just kept grinning.

No good. This was getting me nowhere.

“I don’t want to.” Personally, I was standing there speechless, but Hikaru-san refused categorically. “You have to break down a character, understand them, and re-create them in your own way—that’s the essence of cosplay. It’s a form of self-expression. My pride as a cosplayer won’t allow this. I can’t just take some random items you pulled out of a box and slap them on. I’m just not interested.”

Wow. He sounded so sure of himself. I guess that’s what you get from a guy who’s spent so many years of his life cosplaying.

“I’ll thank you to let me go back to my room now.”

He made to push past the smiling Minori-san—but the next instant, he was upside down.

There was a sort of surprised intake of breath, but no crash. He came down on the floor as light as a feather, maybe because Minori-san was still holding onto his sleeve and collar. She took the force out of the throw just before it ended.

Wait... the throw?!

Did Minori-san just throw Hikaru-san?

Hikaru-san scrambled to his feet. Minori-san was still standing in the exact same place she had been a few seconds before. It had happened so fast, I hadn’t quite been able to process it, but...

“Koganuma-san...?” Hikaru-san said, almost like a groan, as it dawned on him what had happened. Minori-san was both a soldier in the Japan Self-Defense Force and a lifelong practitioner of the martial arts. She would know that when you wanted to overwhelm an opponent quickly, powerful, targeted strikes were less effective than a throw that impacted the entire body at once—or anyway, I thought I remembered reading as much somewhere.

“You’re not getting away, all right?”

Her smile deepened.

Hikaru-san and I spotted the unfathomable depths in that expression and looked at each other. We could see an inhuman light in Minori-san's eyes.

I should've realized. Minori-san wasn't cheerful because she was back to normal.

She had gone to the uttermost extremes of BL withdrawal, and it had broken her completely.

"This is humiliating...!" Hikaru-san whispered painfully.

He really did look ridiculous. His long black hair was tied behind his head, and the top half of him was bare except for a detachable collar and a bowtie. As for the lower half, it was those black competition swim trunks, knee-high socks, and loafers.

And nothing else.

I guess the black briefs alone could have been passed off as a swimsuit, but when you started in with all the accessories, it began to feel a little weird. In any event, Hikaru-san ended up showing an awful lot of skin...

"Ooh, I love a good butler," Minori-san crooned, smiling. "Cute little knees are so important for a guy. Fufufufufu!"

Did she say... butler...?

I considered: to me, the outfit just looked perverse from every angle, but apparently to her, it looked like a butler. She must have been adding a lot with her imagination.

Come to think of it, back when we had gone to the "beach," she had dressed Garius in something similar and referred to him as the "bare butler."

Because Hikaru-san made such a convincing girl most of the time, it was easy to forget he was actually a guy, but the totally flat chest and black swim briefs made it inescapable. I was almost relieved, in a way.

"What are you looking at?" Hikaru-san said sharply when he noticed me. The way he was blushing made it obvious how embarrassed he was, despite the fact that he was apparently perfectly comfortable dressing like a girl. I admit, his particular hang-ups didn't make complete sense to me. Then again, he seemed like a fairly odd person, no matter what kind of clothes he was wearing.

“Ooh, and *you* look just divine!” Minori-san went on. “Why don’t you go have a look in the mirror?!”

“Urgh...” I said.

Argh. And just when I had managed to focus enough on Hikaru-san to distract myself from my own situation.

Yes: I was a pretty bizarre sight, myself.

Hikaru-san at least got to start with a men’s swimsuit. Mine was a girl’s. Well, maybe it wasn’t so much a swimsuit as a leotard. Whatever, it was covered with a white apron.

“Shinichi-kun... The ‘bunny maid’ look really works for you,” Minori-san said thoughtfully.

“Please! Make it stop!” I cried.

She had forced a rabbit-eared headband on my head. On my feet—I had no idea where she had gotten these—was a pair of red high-heeled shoes. I didn’t even know they made heels big enough for men. Most frightening of all was simply that Minori-san had brought them here to Eldant at some point.

My shoulders, collarbone, and thighs were all out in the open, and I thought I might weep from the embarrassment.

Anyway, why did I have to be the girl?! Wasn’t that Hikaru-san’s specialty? I mean, not that I was eager to be a bare butler or anything!

“I love it...” Minori-san let out a long, impassioned, satisfied breath. There was no trace of the fearsome monster she had briefly shown us when Hikaru-san tried to mutiny on her plans to dress us up. She had completely overpowered us, reminding me exactly how awesome JSDF soldiers could be. It was reassuring to know Japan was in good hands...!

No, no, wait.

“Oooh hoo hoo! The look on your face, Shinichi-kun... It’s perfect...” she said. “And even though you say things like, ‘Forget perfect! I’m a man! Why should I have to dress up like a girl?!’, you have to obey your sempai, until eventually embarrassment turns to pleasure, and you see the poignant beauty of it all...!”

Th-This runs deep! Like, deeper than the Marianas Trench!

I could only shudder at this glimpse of the abyss of Minori-san’s obsession.

But it was really all built on BL, wasn’t it? I understood that. Even if I didn’t want to.

“The gap really makes the difference, doesn’t it?” she said. “It’s the contrast with your normal look that makes it so moe.”

Yes! I got that! And I had to admit it was just the same as less deviant tastes! But that didn’t mean—

“Koganuma-san, have you had enough yet?! Give me my clothes back!” Hikaru-san demanded. Minori-san, for her part, was practically spinning with joy.

You get the picture: Hikaru-san and I had changed clothes as Minori-san requested, albeit under extreme duress. But surely she’d seen enough by now. This must have released some of the pressure of that thwarted desire.

Minori-san, by the way, had stuffed Hikaru-san’s and my clothes into her cardboard box and kicked it out into the hallway. If we wanted to get them back, we would have to get past Minori-san first. And it was already abundantly clear that even the two of us together wouldn’t be able to manage that.

“Koganuma-san! Are you listening to me?!”

Minori-san stopped in mid-spin.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, still smiling. “A moment of moe is good, but I want an eternity!”

“Huh?”

“*In! Other! Words!*” Minori-san said with undisguised glee, “Now we’re going to have a lovely little photo shoot! ♪”

“Wha...?”

Wait—these embarrassing-to-death outfits were going to be immortalized as data?!

Sh-She wasn’t a woman! She was a demon!

Minori-san, humming happily as Hikaru-san and I stood there trembling, reached into her pocket. But then...

“Hm—?” She was confused. “Aw, no! I got so caught up in making those clothes that I forgot it. Hehe!” I guess Minori-san had forgotten her camera. Normally it’s kind of cute when a girl sticks out her tongue in embarrassment. I’d never seen it look so scary as at this moment.

“I’ll go get it—you just wait right there!” she said, darting out of the dining room.

The instant she was gone, Hikaru-san and I didn’t even share a glance before we launched into action. As if we were going to just wait politely for her to come back!

We came flying out of the kitchen, then went dashing in the opposite direction from where Minori-san was walking along humming, "*La diddly daah* ♪" I would have liked to grab the box with our clothes in it, but it was over in Minori-san's direction, so we had to leave it there.

"Oh!" Minori-san noticed us right away, of course, but maybe excitement about that photo shoot had made her relax her guard, because she wasn't quite as quick as usual, and didn't manage to get a hand on either of us.

We could sure hear her shouting, though. "Stop! Hold it right there! My moe! My Beeee Elllll!"

She probably wasn't far behind us. With no time to look back and check, I huffed and puffed along, running as fast as I could through the halls of the mansion.

The windows of the room were covered with thick curtains. I could see dust dancing in the slim shafts of light that leaked in between the blinds, and the room smelled musty. Maybe not the healthiest place to be for an extended length of time, but at that moment, we had nowhere else to go.

The space was dark and confined. The only sound was of two people breathing—Hikaru-san and I, as we sat in the stretching silence.

I leaned against the wall, wrapping a blanket around myself as I glanced at Hikaru-san. He was wrapped in another blanket, so that all I could see was his head and neck. His lips were pulled tight.

Then there was a knock at the door. A shock ran between us. We had to keep Minori-san from finding out we were here. If we could have stopped breathing, we would have.

One second, two... We watched the door.

Then, finally, we heard a familiar voice from the other side. "Master, Hikaru-sama, it's me. It's Myusel."

With the blanket still wrapped around me to silence my footsteps, I crept toward the door. "What's the password?" I asked.

"Beast ears, beast tail," she answered immediately.

I let out a sigh of relief and opened the attic door.

"Pardon me," Myusel said, coming in with a tray. I quickly shut the door again, as if there were a vacuum outside or something. The magic

kicked in, making it impossible to open the door from the outside.

Yes, even this attic had one of those magic locks on it.

Myusel knelt by Hikaru-san and set the tray on the ground. “I brought your breakfast.”

I crouched down, too, passing one of the plates of food to Hikaru-san. “How’s Minori-san look?” I asked Myusel.

“The same as yesterday,” she said, looking nervous. “She just wanders around the mansion, muttering ‘*homoo, homooo*.’ Elvia-san isn’t any better...”

“Great...”

After Minori-san’s freaky dress-up escapade the previous day, Hikaru-san and I had fled to this room. Minori-san had confiscated our clothes, and we could hardly run outside dressed the way we were. We had considered our rooms, but our keys had been with our clothes, so we were locked out—and even if we had been able to get in, we could never have repelled Minori-san’s attacks.

Wherever we went, Minori-san could easily just steal a spare key from Myusel and break in—so the safest place would be one where she didn’t know where we were.

I had, of course, considered having Myusel go get clothes for us, but—perhaps because she was one step ahead, or perhaps just by a fujoshi’s instinct—Minori-san was shambling around near our rooms, and even Myusel couldn’t get too close.

So as much as we hated it, Hikaru-san and I were stuck in Minori-san’s outfits.

Of course, I had taken off the bunny ears and heels. Hikaru-san had ditched the collar and bowtie.

And that was what led us to this moment. With Myusel’s help, we had managed to survive an entire day in the attic. In case you were curious, we used a pot in the back of the room to answer nature’s call. I have to admit, it wasn’t the most comfortable feeling in the world, but beggars can’t be choosers. Much as they wish they could be... (sob)

Still, we hardly felt safe. If Minori-san caught on to the existence of this room, it would be the end.

Hikaru-san ate breakfast, his expression drained. He was probably tired from being stuck in a room we weren’t used to, with no beds, and not even space to really stretch ourselves out.

Even so, and with all apologies to Hikaru-san, I was grateful I wasn't the only one suffering here. If I had been by myself, I'm sure I would have broken down by now.

Feeling the sort of solidarity with Hikaru-san that can only come from shared agony, I started eating my breakfast. As I did so, I peeked out the curtain of the nearest window to steal a glance outside. I was hoping Minori-san might, just might, have left the building, as unlikely as that was. If she put enough distance between herself and our rooms, we might even be able to take the chance to get our clothes back. After that, maybe we could go—I didn't know. To the JSDF soldiers at the garrison, or to Petralka at the castle, for help.

I was pretty sure it was hopeless even as I looked out the window... But then I gasped. I saw something I had never expected: a bird-drawn carriage stopped outside our house. It was very elaborate, which might mean...

"Could that be...?" I whispered.

"Is something happening?" Myusel and Hikaru-san came up behind me and also looked out the window.

Disembarking from the carriage were Petralka and Garius, along with four women. They weren't wearing armor, but each was armed, suggesting that they were Petralka's royal guard.

I watched, hardly daring to breathe, as the six of them disappeared into the house.

"Could it be—could the magician be here?!" Hikaru-san asked elatedly.

"Hrm, maybe they're just coming to check on her?" I suggested. No one in that group looked like a spellcaster, and they'd already told us they expected it to be six months before the guy came back—no way he'd shown up in just a couple of days.

"Yeah," Hikaru-san said, shoulders slumping, "I guess you're right." He went back where he had been, wrapping the blanket once more around his nearly naked body. He was always a little bit on the sulky side, but the anxiety he was obviously feeling today had softened his hardest edges.

"Hey," I said, watching Hikaru-san trudge back to his place. "What if we get Petralka to help us? I know we don't have a way out, and we don't want too many people to see us this way... but it wouldn't be that bad, if it were just her. Maybe she could sneak us into her carriage..."

I did have the distinct sense that I didn't want Garius to see me this way, but I was caught in the beggars/choosers conundrum again.

“When Petralka and the others come back out of the house, we’ll signal them from here, get them to notice us. We can even climb out the window if we have to.” We could crawl across the roof... Right?

“Maybe...”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Myusel said. They both nodded.

And so we waited for Petralka and her entourage to emerge. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. Then thirty. Finally, it had been a whole hour, but there was still no sign of them.

“Don’t you think it’s taking a while?” Hikaru-san said.

“Yeah.” I nodded uncomfortably.

If they had just come to check on us, I would have expected to see them come back out right away.

“I... I’m going to go see them myself!” Hikaru-san had apparently shaken off his numbness, because he got to his feet, blanket and all.

“Huh? But...”

“If worst comes to worst, we can have Garius fight for us!”

“Such violence...”

Hikaru-san rushed over to the door, put his hand on the knob. Seeing him like that, I had a thought.

“Okay,” I said, going over in my own blanket. “I’ll go, too. I can’t let you face danger all alone.”

“...You’re sure you’re not just afraid to stay here by yourself?”

Oops. Bingo.

I pretended not to hear his question and simply said, “Let’s go.”

“I’ll accompany you both.” Myusel came up to us, and together the three of us went downstairs, to the second floor of the mansion.

We walked down the hallway as quietly as we could, so as to keep Minori-san from noticing us. Myusel was at the front of our formation, then me, with Hikaru-san bringing up the rear. The blankets were long and hard to walk in, but it was better than prancing around in those perverted outfits, plus the cloth absorbed our footsteps to a certain degree.

Then Myusel said, quietly but sharply, “Halt, please!” and Hikaru-san and I ground to a stop. An almost painful tension hung among us.

“I hear something,” Myusel said. She pressed herself against the wall, peeking down the hallway. “It’s...!”

Unable to restrain ourselves, Hikaru-san and I also poked our faces around the corner to see what was out there.

“Crap...!”

It was Minori-san. And she was running.

And it got worse. Elvia was there, and she was running, too.

But it got even worse than that. Hot on their heels were Petralka, Garius, and the four knights, all of them going full tilt.

They all ran in unison, easily, in formation. It was almost like... military training.

“The top and the bottom were lying in bed! ♪” Minori-san was singing.

Wait, what?!

“The top and the bottom were lying in bed! ♪” Elvia, Petralka, Garius, and, God help us, even the knights, chorused in unison.

“The bottom rolled over, this is what he said: ♪ A-gimmie some! ♪ Being with you is a-ma-zing! ♪”

“The bottom rolled over, this is what he said: ♪ A-gimmie some! ♪ Being with you is a-ma-zing! ♪”

“Homo for you! ♪ Homo for me! ♪ Mmm, homoo! ♪”

“Homo for you! ♪ Homo for me! ♪ Mmm, homoo! ♪”

I felt my brain starting to go rotten just listening to the song.

“This cadence... Isn’t this from *Ad***ce Wars*?”

“You recognize that, but you don’t realize it’s originally from Sergeant Hartman? You know, the *Full-**tal Jacket* guy?”

Hikaru-san, dread written on his face, burst my blank-minded bubble with his jab. Thank goodness.

“Up in the morning to the rising sun! ♪ Gotta cum all day til the cumming’s done! ♪ Covered ding-a-lings are a genuine joy! ♪ Shotacons are fallen straight boys! ♪ I love BL, it’s my jam! ♪ Lets me know just who I am! ♪”

Okay, wait, waitwaitwaitwait.

Forget where we were and what was happening. I had to suppress a raging urge to just run over there and launch one-liner after one-liner.

“One, two, three, four!”

“My BL!”

“One, two, three, four!”

“Your BL!”

Each time Minori-san called out, the others responded in time.

“Shotas’ corp! Old-guys’ corp! Homos’ corp! BOYS LOVE!”

For a moment I just watched them run, totally dumbfounded. Then it struck me: all their eyes had lost focus; their heads were just bobbing up and down. In manga terms, they had those “spiral eyes.”

“It looks like we’re too late,” Hikaru-san said, voicing my own thought.

Too late. I had no idea what Minori-san had done, but in just a short time she had brainwashed everyone, up to and including Petralka and her entourage. Or maybe *infected* would be a better word.

The mind of a fujoshi is something to fear. The BL virus is one to dread. How powerful might this contagion be? If we didn’t do something, there might be... an outbreak!

Whatever the case, this scuppered our hopes of getting help from Petralka. She and the others were totally in Minori-san’s thrall.

“Let’s go back,” Hikaru-san said. “It’s dangerous to stay here.”

“Yeah...”

I learned then that normal despair is nowhere near as bad as the despair that comes on the far side of hope.

“I don’t want no bishoujo queen! ♪”

“I don’t want no bishoujo queen! ♪”

“All I want’s a cute male teen! ♪”

“All I want’s a cute male teen! ♪”

Gosh.

We headed back to our attic hideout, our shoulders drooping as if under a terrible, invisible weight. Behind us, we could still hear Minori-san and the others reciting their rotten perversion of the Marine Corps cadence. Chanting, chanting, on and on.

I was sitting on the floor of the attic room, wrapped in my blanket and sighing. Hikaru-san, also in a blanket, was leaning against one wall, and Myusel was watching us both with a pained expression.

This was hopeless. I had been so sure this was our chance to escape, but now we had more enemies than ever.

“Myusel, you’re the last person I can count on...”

“I-It’s an honor... I think...”

“You know, you *are* the only one,” I said.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re the only one who hasn’t been brainwashed by Minori-san.” Or infected, or whatever. Even Petralka had succumbed in hardly an hour’s time. Yet Myusel, who lived in the same house as Minori-san, seemed to be safe. Why was that?

Maybe she had some sort of antibody that helped her fight the fujovirus (named by: Kanou Shinichi).

“It’s probably...” Myusel blushed. “I wouldn’t want to see anyone do that sort of thing with you, Master, not even Hikaru-sama.”

“That sort of thing?” I echoed.

“N-Never mind, forget I said anything! I’ve g-g-got some chores to do now!” She stood up quickly and bustled out of the room, still red-faced.

Now it was just me and Hikaru-san in the attic.

“Ahh, so that’s it,” Hikaru-san said, half smirking, half smiling.

“What? What’s it?” I asked.

“No hints for dull boys,” he said. I would almost have sworn he was enjoying himself.

But what in the world was he talking about?

Unless...

Our conversation broke off there. Silence descended once again.

“Ugh,” I said finally. It was hot. The temperature must have been going up as the day went on.

This attic room was perfect for trapping heat. Yesterday had been cloudy, so it wasn’t so bad, but today the sky was totally clear. The temperature in the room would probably keep climbing.

“So hot...” I felt myself sweating through my clothes. It was like a steam bath in here. My energy was slowly seeping away.

Pretty soon, Hikaru-san and I had both gotten rid of our blankets. It was just the two of us in here, anyway. We had already seen each other; there was nothing to be embarrassed about now. Putting up a front turned out to be awfully tiring.

“I wonder what we should do now,” Hikaru-san murmured.

“Try to hold out until the day after tomorrow,” I said.

“The day after tomorrow?” Hikaru-san replied. But then he added, “Oh. You mean when the delivery gets here...”

It would be two more days until the garrison got its delivery. If the cargo included a couple of new BL books, Minori-san might come around.

If she didn’t, we were in real trouble.

“Just gotta... hang in there...”

I looked blankly around the room. Rabbit ears, heels, a collar, and a bowtie were scattered on the floor.

Hikaru-san did the same, looking at the items we’d discarded. He picked up the closest one, the rabbit ears. Maybe he was just bored.

“What on earth was Minori-san thinking?” I said. “Making us wear crap like this?”

“It looks surprisingly...” Hikaru-san paused. “...Good.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

I could hardly comprehend what Hikaru-san was saying. It seemed like he hardly could either—the moment he registered what had come out of his own mouth, he blinked in shock.

We looked at each other for a long few seconds.

“Hikaru-san?! Wh-What are you saying?!”

“Ah... Ahh ha ha ha ha! Right, what *am* I talking about?” He laughed a little too loud. “I guess I just looked at it so long I started to think it was... normal or something.”

“Well, it’s not! It is 100% not normal!” I covered my ears and wrapped myself back in my blanket. “Please! I’m begging you, I need you of all people to stay sane! Don’t leave me alone!”

Had the fujovirus reached even our enclave?! Or was this one of those things like, you know, when people in extreme situations and terrible isolation try to forget their fear and, like, start feeling affection towards terrorists and stuff? Uh, what was it, again? Chloroform syndrome! No, uhh, Bågenholm Syndrome! Wait—Stockholm Syndrome! Yes! That was it!

Argh! Even without direct exposure, we were at risk of falling under the fujoshi’s spell!

“I mustn’t be infected I mustn’t be infected I mustn’t be infected,” Hikaru-san and I repeated to ourselves, like a mantra.

It was all I could do for the rest of that day.

Anyway... Come the next day, I was awakened from a restless sleep by a knock at the door.

“Hrrmm?” I grunted.

The heat and stuffiness conspired to keep me from thinking clearly. I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, but I definitely felt tired.

"Master, it's Myusel," came the voice on the other side of the door.

I pushed aside my fuzzy-headedness by sheer force of will and got up.

"What's the password?"

"Beast ears, beast tail."

"Okay, just a moment..."

I sleepily opened the door. Myusel, bearing breakfast on a tray, entered slowly.

"Mmm? Is it morning already?" Hikaru-san said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"I've brought you breakfast."

"Thanks, Myusel."

"Yes, sir."

As I went to close the door, I happened to glance at Myusel. Still armed with the tray, she was looking at the ground for some reason.

I wondered what was wrong. Was she not feeling well?

"Myusel?" I asked, concerned.

At just that moment, she looked up—and she was smiling.

"Homooo..."

I was struck speechless. *Oh no!* Myusel, my sweet maid, my last hope—her indigo eyes had all but gone spiral. She looked just like Petralka and Elvia had the day before—in other words, she was obviously, totally, well and truly brainwashed.

"Myusel?!"

She stood before us, grinning. There was nothing fun or pleasant about this situation—yet she couldn't stop smiling.

G-Geez, that's scary!

"Et tu, Brutus—I mean, Myusel?!"

"Homoooo!"

A howl came from the direction of the door, which I hadn't yet closed. And not just a howl. Hands came clawing out from behind Myusel. It was like a scene straight out of a zombie movie.

"A fujoshi horde!" I was feeling too blitzed to react immediately, but Hikaru-san was quicker. He shoved past Myusel, towards the rotten crowd behind her, throwing all his body weight against the door and slamming it shut.

“We’re getting out of here!”

“B-But Myusel—”

“There’s no hope for her now!”

“But! But...!”

Even as we argued, we could hear pounding and scrabbling from the other side of the door, which shook desperately. With the magic ward, it ought to hold, but...

“If Myusel’s on their side now, it means our enemies have the key! It won’t take them long to get in here!”

I caught my breath. He was right. We weren’t safe here anymore!

“Quick!” Hikaru-san grabbed my hand. I just followed him, no longer able to resist. The image of Myusel, her eyes spinning mindlessly, was burned into my memory.

Ahh... Myusel, who had brought our meals to this attic room. Myusel, who had been our ally. She had been safe until yesterday. So why... Why!

“Damn it allllll!” With a yell that was neither quite rage nor sadness, Hikaru-san and I jumped through the window to the outside. Luckily, the slope of the roof was gentle, so we didn’t have to fear immediately rolling off.

We made our way to the edge of the roof, where we leapt to the branches of a big tree that grew next to the mansion. Honestly, it was far enough that I don’t think I could ever have made the jump if no one had been chasing me, but a man can do amazing things when he’s being pursued by the BL equivalent of the walking dead. Hikaru-san and I jumped to the tree, then scrambled down the trunk to the ground.

But I had a question.

“Where are we running *to*?!”

We couldn’t go back in the house; Minori-san and her rotten army would find us immediately. But we could hardly leave the house, either...!

“Over there!” Running around the grounds, we spotted a small log shed —Brooke’s workshop.

Brooke and Cerise weren’t back yet, and the shed had a few advantages —it was on the grounds but not in the house, and it had no magic locks on it. Hikaru-san and I dove inside.

I kicked the door shut, and Hikaru-san locked it soundly.

Then we finally had a moment to breathe. I took a look around the little building. There was just one small window, and it was firmly shuttered, so

the shed was dim inside.

"There's got to be... There's got to be somewhere to hide," I said. One crude lock was not going to keep us safe.

Still panting, we huddled down in a crevice between the wall and the stuff inside. I was pressed up against everything around me, and my revealing outfit made my skin feel sticky, but I couldn't worry about that now. I just had to make myself as small, as invisible, as possible.

For a long moment, neither Hikaru-san nor I said anything. We both knew we really had to be completely silent this time. To avoid breathing, if possible. And yet, we also knew it was probably just a matter of time until they found us.

What to do? What could we possibly do next? I wondered if I could silence my heartbeat as well as my breath.

Sometime later—I had no idea how much time had passed—I thought I heard a sound. "Hm?" I murmured. "What was that?"

It wasn't anything natural. Hikaru-san must have heard the sound too, because the despair on his face was briefly interrupted by curiosity.

The sound was coming closer.

No, wait.

This wasn't just a "sound."

"If I could do something like that ♪ wouldn't that be great? ♪"

It was Minori-san and her troupe, singing another song.

"Is that... Dora*mon?"

She was singing the theme song to an anime beloved by people all over Japan, something anyone from that nation would recognize immediately.

"Holes here, holes there, holes everywhere ♪"

"Huh...?"

"I hope, I hope, they all come true ♪ I hope they come true with that wonderful butt ♪"

Wait, what?!

"How I'd love to put it in that cute little butt! ♪"

"Right! YAOI HOLE!"

The window was too far away to see for certain, but the way the singing faded in and out made it sound like Minori-san was marching everyone around the shed.

Hang on—who was it that had answered "Right!" in that Do**emon voice?! It was really weird because it sounded *just* like him! I actually had

this sudden image of a future robo-cat pulling a Yaoi Hole out of his pocket—talk about your hair standing on end!

"Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! ♂ I just love it! ♪"

"That's not how it goes, and you know it!" I exclaimed reflexively.

"Shut up, idiot!" Hikaru-san whispered fiercely, but the damage was done.

"S-Sorry..."

But I mean, those lyrics were just too... You know? They were like a test of how long I could hold myself back—how was I supposed to listen to that and *not* say anything?!

Okay, granted, we had other problems right now.

A sudden, chill silence fell all around us. Maybe they hadn't heard me, so they went away someplace?

As hopes go, it wasn't much, but I clung to it. Until the instant—

Bam!

The instant someone pounded on the door, hard. And not just the one time. Not even twice. It was a flurry of blows. The first few were searching, sporadic. But somewhere around knock number ten, it became a constant stream, *bambambambam!*

It wasn't just the door, either. It seemed like every side of the shed was being pounded on from the outside.

"Heeek?!"

I was pretty sure I knew how people in zombie apocalypses felt now. This was really and truly the end. We were surrounded. There was nowhere to run.

"Ahhh..." Trembling, I drew up to Hikaru-san.

"Shinichi-kuuun? Hikaru-kuuun?" It was Minori-san. She sounded weirdly... pleasant. "We know you're in there, okay? Just come on out!"

Under her sweet voice we could hear the doorknob rattle as she turned it hard enough to break it off. Almost as if in harmony, the pounding on the door and walls continued. I was terrified, sure that she would bust open the door, or that one of the walls would give way.

This was it. This was all she wrote.

"Eeeyaarrrghhh!"

Screaming, Hikaru-san and I jumped out from our place by the wall and flung all our body weight against the door, our last bulwark. This was no

time to be hiding. Not if there was one single, solitary thing we could do to keep that door from opening.

Bambambambambam!

Now that we were leaning against the door, the impacts rattled directly into our bodies.

What were we going to do?! Was there any possible way out of this situation?!

I tried desperately to think through the chaos in my brain.

But at that instant, I heard another sound.

A gunshot?

“Huh...?”

I felt a sort of floating sensation.

The smack that came a second later clarified what had happened. The door’s hinges had cracked, and the weight of our bodies against the door had pushed it outward, sending us tumbling outside.

In other words...

“Eeyikes!”

The momentum carried Hikaru-san and me along the ground.

“...Yow...”

It took a second to register.

I was lying faceup on the ground.

And Hikaru-san was all but on top of me.

Almost as if he were pushing me down...

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhh!!”

I heard some kind of howl—or was that a cheer?—split the air.

“Huh? What?”

Before we could blink, Hikaru-san and I were surrounded by fujoshi.

Minori-san was there. And Myusel. And Petralka. And Elvia and the knights. And even...

Yes, Garius too. To be fair, he didn’t shout. But that kind of made him even scarier.

Wait, had Petralka and everyone been away from the castle this whole time?

That was some brainwashing. O fujoshi, greatly to be feared!

Wait, I don’t have time to be awestruck by something like that!

“Ah... Ahhh...”

I could feel their gazes drilling into me.

Stoppit. I'm scared. Don't look at me...!

Minori-san took a step forward, away from the circle of cheering women. She stopped just beside me and Hikaru-san. At that exact moment, the light caught her glasses in just such a way as to hide her eyes.

But then she raised both hands with gusto, like a conductor beginning some piece of classical music. Like she was going to catch a falling sky.

And she said...

"I shall forgive all!"

"Huh...?"

Our eyes turned to dots at her impassioned proclamation.

A cloud rolled lazily over the sun. It cut the light just enough that we could see Minori-san's eyes again. She looked a little bit... better.

I caught my breath. She looked a little like, you know, how you feel after... *you know*. Like she was enjoying the afterglow.

And everyone else—Petralka and Myusel, Elvia and everyone—had the same sort of expression on their faces. At the very least, they didn't have the crazy spiral eyes anymore. I was no longer worried that Minori-san and her friends were going to tear us apart.

Could it be we were... safe?

Hikaru-san looked down at me, and I looked up at him.

"The two gaze into each other's eyes!" Minori-san intoned, her hands raised to the sky like an opera singer bursting into an aria. "All creation grows dim and distant! They're alone in their own world! Hot, blazing, burns the passion that flows between them! Though covered in mud, they are still—indeed, its besmirching touch makes them all the more—beautiful!"

"Uh. Minori-s—san? I think—"

"*Photo time!!*"

The next thing I heard was a cascade of digital camera shutter sounds. Minori-san had whipped out a camera from who knew where and started taking pictures of us. She switched from one angle to another with the speed of a pro photographer, so fast we didn't even have time to butt in with a smart remark.

"Hoo hoo! Ufu-fu-fu-fu-fu-fu!"

The sound of the shutter mingled with her unnerving laughter. Hikaru-san and I, both utterly exhausted, couldn't fight, couldn't run, couldn't do

anything at all.

Day eight.

The long-awaited day of the delivery.

Minori-san came home clutching a cardboard box that presumably included the infamous BL book (*Super-M Spectacles*, was it?) and smiling like there was no tomorrow.

I happened to run into her in the front entryway. “Finally! I thought I was going to die!” she announced, even though I hadn’t said anything. I guess she really was happy about that book.

“You thought *you* were going to die?” I said scornfully. Just the memory of the outfit Minori-san had forced me to wear for the past three days was enough to paralyze me with the heebie-jeebies. If I had a time machine, the first thing I would do would be to erase—not the data, but that whole disgusting past experience.

Incidentally, Minori-san’s little photo session with me and Hikaru-san the day before must have finally sated her, because afterwards, she seemed to regain her sanity. Shortly after that, all our brainwashed (?) friends went back to normal, all at once. They had simply been captive to the force of her passion.

“I really *was*! That’s why I had you dress up like that.”

“Well, next time you feel that way, I hope you’ll pick dying instead.”

Hikaru-san, probably having reached the limit of his endurance, was in bed with a fever today. I wasn’t sick, but my body felt impossibly heavy.

“Aww.”

“C’mon, don’t give me that look.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” Minori-san said. “I’ll be able to look at yesterday’s photos and get all moe.”

The way she puffed out her cheeks was so adorable—what was I supposed to do?

“Jeez, stop it already!” I found myself exclaiming.

In response, Minori-san gave me a surprisingly languid smile. “I’m so glad you both came around. You even ended up posing for me and everything.”

“You pulled your *gun* on us.”

“What? No, no, I just happened to be holding it.”

“That’s the JSDF for you... Always an excuse.” I gave a long, long sigh. Then I said, “Huh. You know, you got a shot of us looking like we were into each other, but never one where we were really about to, like, get hot and heavy.”

And thank God for that.

Knowing Minori-san, I’d been afraid she might force us to do something that would require a mosaic in the final photo, but thankfully, Hikaru-san and I never got closer than nose to nose. ...Not that I was thrilled about that.

In other words, we never crossed the final frontier.

“Of course,” Minori-san said with a smile. “The beauty of BL is the fade to black.”

“Really?”

“The moment *before* the kiss is the one that lets your imagination really take flight.”

“...Huh. *Huh.*”

“And...” Minori-san looked into the distance for a second. “There’s more to love than shoving your bodies together. Sometimes love is most perfect when you never touch at all.”

“Gee, I... I feel like that’s really profound, but on second thought, it’s not profound at all.”

Minori-san stood there with a beatific look on her face. There was nothing I could do but tiredly roll my eyes.

And that’s the story. The tale of the week that would go down in history as the Seven Days of Rottenness, a memory of fear and shame to Amutech’s employees.

And it left us with a lesson:

Thou shalt not take BL from Koganuma Minori.

□□□□□

To Be Cont’d...

Afterword

Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 7 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

It's a collection of short stories, just as I said it would be in the afterword to the last volume. And Minori-san is finally, finally on the cover. I guess she's a half-step removed from the other girls who surround Shinichi (the protagonist), which makes it hard to really make her the center of a story—and consequently, hard to get her on the cover.

You might be interested to know that the stories in this volume are arranged chronologically, with only "Seven Rotten Days" taking place after Volume 6, while the others take place before Volume 5. That's why Hikaru-san only appears in the final story.

Personally, I'm not ideally suited to finding the best way to motivate a fujoshi-centric plot like the one in "Seven Rotten Days," so I once again turned to my assistant, who's a woman, for help. To get a BL story going with things like the hands of the clock, or the ceiling and the floor, though... The power of a fujoshi's imagination is truly a terrifying thing to behold. Do they have no limits...?

Oh, also—the other day, I got to attend the ADR session for the first episode of the *Outbreak Company* anime. Anime tends to be done on a very strict deadline (and budget), so often you have no idea how it's going to turn out until it's come out of the oven. But this first episode felt pretty much the way I'd imagined it. The director and the actors had great timing, and me and Yuugen-san, who was there too, spent most of the time in hysterics.

This anime has been graced with a top-flight cast; the actors for Shinichi, Myusel, Petralka, and Minori have all played leading men and women before. So maybe it shouldn't surprise me that they're so good—just personally, though, I thought Matoba was especially great (hehe). Kind of like, *Ooh, yeah, that's how a nasty bureaucrat with ulterior motives should sound.*

Okay, next time we return you to your regularly scheduled main plot, but I'm also planning to write a bad *manzai* comedy sketch as a supplement to the anime, do a script book for the drama CD, and so on, so there's lots to look forward to.

Right-o, see you next time!

Ichiro Sakaki
31 July 2013

YOUR SWIMSUIT MAKES ME ALL @$#* !!
HOW ODD...
WHAT SHE'D HOPED FOR
SIGH
SWIMSUIT

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Outbreak Company: Volume 7
by Ichiro Sakaki

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THE POWER OF MOE
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